佐島勤
Tsutomu Sato
illustration／石田可奈
Kana Ishida
魔法科高校の劣等生
The irregular at magic high school
九校戦編〈上〉
3
電撃文庫

魔法科高校の劣等生3
The irregular at magic high school
九校戦編〈上〉
佐島勤
Tsutomu Sato
illustration／石田可奈
Kana Ishida
illustrator assistant／ジミー・ストーン、末永康子
design／BEE-PEE

七草真由美
さえぐさ・まゆみ
魔法科高校の生徒会会長。十師族・七草家の長女。小柄な身体だが、体型はグラマー。遠隔精密魔法の分野で十年に一人の英才と呼ばれている。性格は小悪魔的。
「さあ、九校戦会場へ向かいましょう。みんな、楽しんで、そして勝ちましょう！」
「第一高校の正式スタッフはこれで全員揃いました」
市原鈴音
いちはら・すずね
魔法科高校の生徒会会計。美少女というより美人と表現する方が相応しい容姿を持つ。風貌通りの冷静沈着な性格。愛称は「リンちゃん」だが、真由美しか呼んでいない。

司波深雪

しば・みゆき

司波兄妹の妹。一年A組所属。魔法科高校に主席で入学したエリート。『花冠（ブルーム）』と呼ばれる一科生徒で、得意分野は『冷却魔法』。唯一の愛すべき欠点は『重度のブラコン』。

光井ほのか
みつい・ほのか

1年A組。深雪のクラスメイト。光を操る光波振動系魔法を得意とする。思い込みがやや激しいタイプ。

「雫、助けて！」

「むいてもいい？」

明智英美
あけち・えいみ

1年B組。この世代の魔法師では珍しいクォーター。フルネームはアメリア＝英美＝明智＝ゴールディ。大質量の物体を短時間、高速で移動させる「砲撃魔法」と呼ばれる魔法を得意としている。

「いいじゃない。ほのか、胸が大きいんだから」

北山 雫
きたやま・しずく

1年A組。深雪のクラスメイト。大出力の振動・加速系魔法を得意とする。一見表面上はクールな面持ちで、ほのかとは性格が対照的。

『九校戦』。
正式名称、全国魔法科高校親善魔法競技大会。
毎年、全国から
選りすぐりの魔法科高校生たちが集い、
その若きプライドを賭けて
栄光と挫折の物語を繰り広げる。
魔法関係者のみならず、
多くの観客の集める
魔法科高校生たちの晴れ舞台。
今年も、もうすぐ、
その幕が上がる。

十師族

日本で最強の魔法師集団。

表の権力を放棄する代わりに、政治の裏側で不可侵に等しい権勢を維持する、というのが十師族の基本スタンスである。一条（いちじょう）、一之倉（いちのくら）、一色（いっしき）、二木（ふたつぎ）、二階堂（にかいどう）、二瓶（にへい）、三矢（みつや）、三日月（みかづき）、四葉（よつば）、五輪（いつわ）、五頭（ごとう）、五味（いつみ）、六塚（むつづか）、六角（ろっかく）、六郷（ろくごう）、六本木（ろっぽんぎ）、七草（さえぐさ）、七宝（しっぽう）、七夕（たなばた）、七瀬（ななせ）、八代（やつしろ）、八朔（はっさく）、八幡（はちまん）、九島（くどう）、九鬼（くき）、九頭見（くずみ）、十文字（じゅうもんじ）、十山（とおやま）の二十八の家系から四年に一度の「十師族選定会議」で選ばれた十の家系が『十師族』を名乗る。選定会議で選ばれなかった十八の家は師補十八家（しほじゅうはっけ）と呼ばれ、十師族各家を補佐する立場に回る。現在十師族を構成する家は、「一条」「二木」「三矢」「四葉」「五輪」「六塚」「七草」「八代」「九島」「十文字」。たまたま一から十までの数字が揃っているが、これは十師族という序列が生まれてから初めてのことで、今までは二つ三つの重複・欠番があるのが当たり前だった。

数字付き

十師族の苗字に一から十までの数字が入っているように、百家の中でも本流とされている家系の苗字には"『千』代田"、"『五十』里"、"『千』葉"家の様に、十一以上の数字が入っている。数値の大小が力の強弱を表すものではないが、苗字に数字が入っているかどうかは、血筋が大きく物を言う、魔法師の力量を推測する一つの目安となる。この様に苗字に数字が含まれる魔法師の家系は、十師族、百家本流を一括して「数字付き」の隠語で呼ばれている。

数字落ち

エクストラ・ナンバーズ、略して「エクストラ」とも呼ばれる、「数字」を剥奪された魔法師の一族。かつて、魔法師が兵器であり実験体サンプルであった頃、「成功例」としてナンバーを与えられた魔法師が、「成功例」に相応しい成果を上げられなかった為に捺された烙印。今では「数字落ち」という名称自体、公式に使用することは禁止されている。「数字落ち」であることを理由に差別的取扱いをすることは、魔法師のコミュニティにおいて重大な非違行為とされている。

Character
キャラクター紹介

吉田幹比古
よしだ・みきひこ
1年E組。達也のクラスメイト。
古式魔法の名家。

司波達也
しば・たつや
1年E組。『雑草』と
揶揄される二科生(劣等生)。

光井ほのか
みつい・ほのか
1年A組。深雪のクラスメイト。
光波振動系魔法が得意。

司波深雪
しば・みゆき
1年A組。主席入学した達也の妹。
冷却魔法が得意。

北山 雫
きたやま・しずく
1年A組。深雪のクラスメイト。
振動・加速系魔法が得意。

西城レオンハルト
さいじょう・れおんはると
1年E組。達也のクラスメイト。
硬化魔法が得意。

千葉エリカ
ちば・えりか
1年E組。達也のクラスメイト。
剣術が得意。

柴田美月
しばた・みづき
1年E組。
達也のクラスメイト。
霊子放射光過敏症。

里美スバル
さとみ・すばる
1年D組。美少年と見まごう少女。

森崎 駿
もりさき・しゅん
1年A組。深雪のクラスメイト。
CAD早撃ちが得意。

明智英美
あけち・えいみ
1年B組。クォーターで、フルネームは
アメリア＝英美＝明智＝ゴールディ。

七草真由美
さえぐさ・まゆみ
三年生。生徒会会長。

中条あずさ
なかじょう・あずさ
二年生。生徒会書記。

市原鈴音
いちはら・すずね
三年生。生徒会会計。

服部刑部少丞範蔵
はっとり・ぎょうぶしょうじょう・はんぞう
二年生。生徒会副会長。

辰巳鋼太郎
たつみ・こうたろう
三年生。風紀委員。

沢木 碧
さわき・みどり
二年生。風紀委員。

渡辺摩利
わたなべ・まり
三年生。
風紀委員会委員長。

十文字克人
じゅうもんじ・かつと
三年生。全クラブ活動の
統括組織である部活連の会頭。

五十里 啓
いそり・けい
二年生。魔法理論の成績は学年トップ。
千代田花音とは許嫁同士。

千代田花音
ちよだ・かのん
二年生。活発な印象の少女。
五十里啓とは許嫁同士。

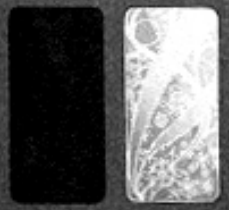
Glossary
用語解説

魔法科高校
国立魔法大学付属高校の通称。全国に九校設置されている。
この内、第一から第三までが一学年定員二百名で一科・二科制度を採っている。

ブルーム、ウィード
第一高校における一科生、二科生の格差を表す隠語。
一科生の制服の左胸には八枚花弁のエンブレムが刺繍されているが、
二科生の制服にはこれが無い。

一科生のエンブレム

CAD〔シー・エー・ディー〕
魔法発動を簡略化させるデバイス。内部には魔法のプログラムが
記録されている。特化型、汎用型などタイプ・形状は様々。


司波深雪のCAD

司波達也の
CAD

フォア・リーブス・テクノロジー〔FLT〕
国内CADメーカーの一つ。元々完成品よりも魔法工学部品で有名だったが、
シルバー・モデルの開発により一躍CADメーカーとしての知名度が増した。

トーラス・シルバー
僅か一年の間に特化型CADのソフトウェアを十年は進歩させたと称えられる天才技術者。

エイドス〔個別情報体〕
元々はギリシア哲学用語。現代魔法学においてエイドスとは、事象に付随する情報体のことで、
「世界」にその「事象」が存在することの記録で、「事象」が「世界」に記す足跡とも言える。
現代魔法学における「魔法」の定義は、エイドスを改変することによって、
その本体である「事象」を改変する技術とされている。

イデア〔情報体次元〕
元々はギリシア哲学用語。現代魔法学においてイデアとは、エイドスが記録される
プラットフォームのこと。魔法の一次的形態は、このイデアというプラットフォームに
魔法式を出力して、そこに記録されているエイドスを書き換える技術である。

起動式
魔法の設計図であり、魔法を構築するためのプログラム。
CADには起動式のデータが圧縮保存されており、
魔法師から流し込まれたサイオン波を展開したデータに従って信号化し、魔法師に返す。

サイオン（想子）
心霊現象の次元に属する非物質粒子で、認識や思考結果を記録する情報素子のこと。
現代魔法の理論的基盤であるエイドス、現代魔法の根幹を支える技術である起動式や魔法式は
サイオンで構築された情報体である。

プシオン（霊子）
心霊現象の次元に属する非物質粒子で、その存在は確認されているがその正体、
その機能については未だ解明されていない。
一般的な魔法師は、活性化したプシオンを「感じる」ことができるにとどまる。

桐原武明
きりはら・たけあき
二年生。剣術部所属。
関東剣術大会中等部のチャンピオン。

壬生紗耶香
みぶ・さやか
二年生。剣道部所属。
中等部剣道大会女子部の全国二位。

風間玄信
かざま・はるのぶ
陸軍101旅団・独立魔装大隊・隊長。
階級は少佐。

真田繁留
さなだ・しげる
陸軍101旅団・独立魔装大隊・幹部。
階級は大尉。

柳 連
やなぎ・むらじ
陸軍101旅団・独立魔装大隊・幹部。
階級は大尉。

山中幸典
やまなか・こうすけ
陸軍101旅団・独立魔装大隊・幹部。
軍医少佐。一級の治癒魔法師。

藤林響子
ふじばやし・きょうこ
風間の副官を務める女性士官。
階級は少尉。

九重八雲
ここのえ・やくも
古式魔法「忍術」の使い手。
達也の体術の師匠。

小野 遥
おの・はるか
1年E組の総合カウンセラー。

一条将輝
いちじょう・まさき
第三高校の一年生。九校戦に出場。
十師族・一条家の次期当主。

吉祥寺真紅郎
きちじょうじ・しんくろう
第三高校の一年生。九校戦に出場。
「カーディナル・ジョージ」の異名で知られている。

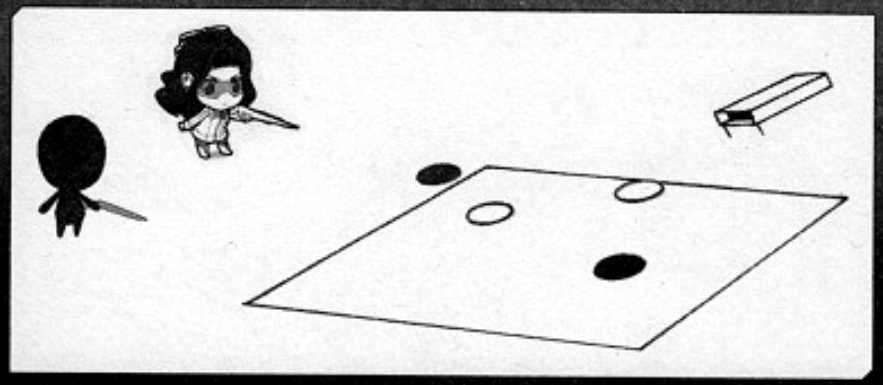
九島 烈
くどう・れつ
世界最強の魔法師の一人と目されていた人物。
敬意を以て「老師」と呼ばれる。

Event
競技種目

スピード・シューティング

選手たちからは「早撃ち」と略される競技。

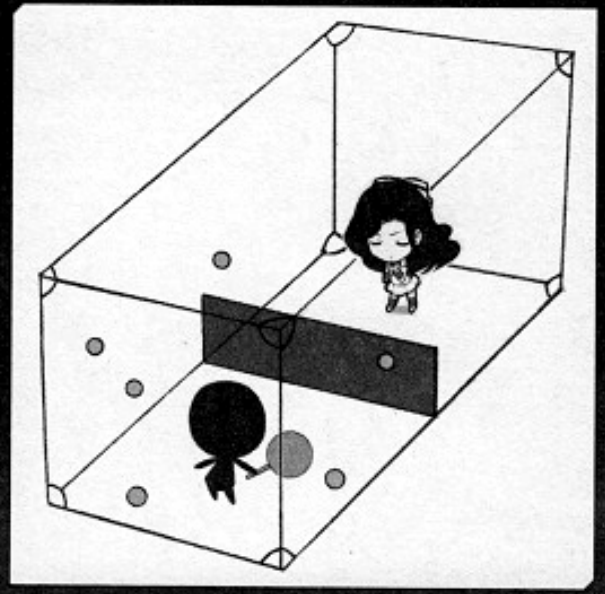
クレー射撃のように空間に射出された標的を魔法で破壊する。紅白の標的が百個ずつ用意され、自分の色の標的を破壊した数を競う。予選は五分の制限時間内に破壊した標的の数を競う、各個人のスコア型。準々決勝以降は対戦型。



クラウド・ボール

選手たちからは「クラウド」と略される競技。

圧縮空気を用いたシューターから射出された直径6センチの低反発ボールを、ラケットまたは魔法を使って制限時間内に相手コートへ落とした回数を競う競技。1セット3分の試合時間で、透明な箱にすっぽり覆われたコートの中へ20秒ごとにボールが追加射出され、最終的には9個のボールを選手は休みなく追いかける。女子は3セットマッチ、男子は5セットマッチで行われる。



九校戦

正式名称『全国魔法科高校親善魔法競技大会』。
その名の通り、第一高校～第九高校までの魔法科高校生たちが全国から集い、熾烈な魔法勝負を繰り広げる団体競技である。

種目は、『スピード・シューティング』、『クラウド・ボール』、『バトル・ボード』、『アイス・ピラーズ・ブレイク』、『ミラージ・バット』、『モノリス・コード』の六つ。
※『モノリス・コード』は男子のみ、『ミラージ・バット』は女子のみの競技。

各校から一つの競技にエントリーできる人数は三名で、一人の選手が出場できる競技は二種目までと決められている。

大会の開催期間は十日間で、一年生のみが出場する競技『新人戦』も設けられている（本戦は学年制限無し）。『新人戦』は四日目から八日目にかけて行われる。

九校戦の勝敗／順位は各競技のポイントの合計で決まる。一位が五十ポイント、二位が三十ポイント、三位が二十ポイントという配分である。スピード・シューティング、バトル・ボード、ミラージ・バットは四位が十ポイント、アクセル・ボールとアイス・ピラーズ・ブレイクは四位から六位までの順位が決まらないので三回戦敗退三チームに各五ポイントが与えられる。九校戦の花形競技、モノリス・コードは一位チームに百ポイント、二位チームに六十ポイント、三位チームに四十ポイントが与えられ、ポイント上で最も比重の大きな競技になっている（『新人戦』のポイントは二分の一にして総合順位点に加算される）。

日程	分類	種目
一日目 8月 3日(水)	本戦 (全学年参加)	『スピード・シューティング』男女予選～決勝トーナメント 『バトル・ボード』男女予選
二日目 8月 4日(木)	本戦 (全学年参加)	『クラウド・ボール』男女予選～決勝 『アイス・ピラーズ・ブレイク』男女予選
三日目 8月 5日(金)	本戦 (全学年参加)	『バトル・ボード』男女準決勝～決勝 『アイス・ピラーズ・ブレイク』男女予選～決勝リーグ
四日目 8月 6日(土)	新人戦 (一年生のみ)	『スピード・シューティング』男女予選～決勝 『バトル・ボード』男女予選
五日目 8月 7日(日)	新人戦 (一年生のみ)	『クラウド・ボール』男女予選～決勝 『アイス・ピラーズ・ブレイク』男女予選
六日目 8月 8日(月)	新人戦 (一年生のみ)	『バトル・ボード』男女準決勝～決勝 『アイス・ピラーズ・ブレイク』男女予選～決勝リーグ
七日目 8月 9日(火)	新人戦 (一年生のみ)	『ミラージ・バット』女子予選～決勝 『モノリス・コード』男子予選リーグ
八日目 8月10日(水)	新人戦 (一年生のみ)	『モノリス・コード』男子決勝トーナメント
九日目 8月11日(木)	本戦 (全学年参加)	『ミラージ・バット』女子予選～決勝 『モノリス・コード』男子予選リーグ
十日目 8月12日(金)	本戦 (全学年参加)	『モノリス・コード』男子決勝トーナメント

ミラージ・バット

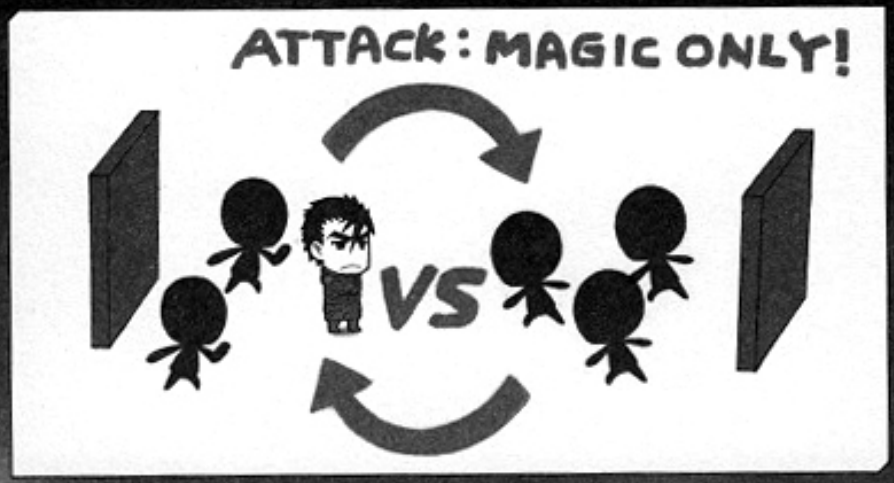
選手たちからは「ミラージ」と略される、女子のみの競技。

空中に投影したホログラム球体目掛け、魔法を使って飛び上がりスティックで打つ競技。九校戦で試合数が最も少ない競技だが、試合時間は最長である。試合中、選手は絶え間なく空中に飛び上がり魔法を発動し続けるため、選手に掛かる負担はフルマラソンに匹敵するとも言われている。九校戦のミラージ・バットは女子のみの種目で、凝った衣装を身にまとった女子選手が飛び回る姿は妖精のようだと評される。

モノリス・コード

選手たちからは「モノリス」と略される、男子のみの競技。

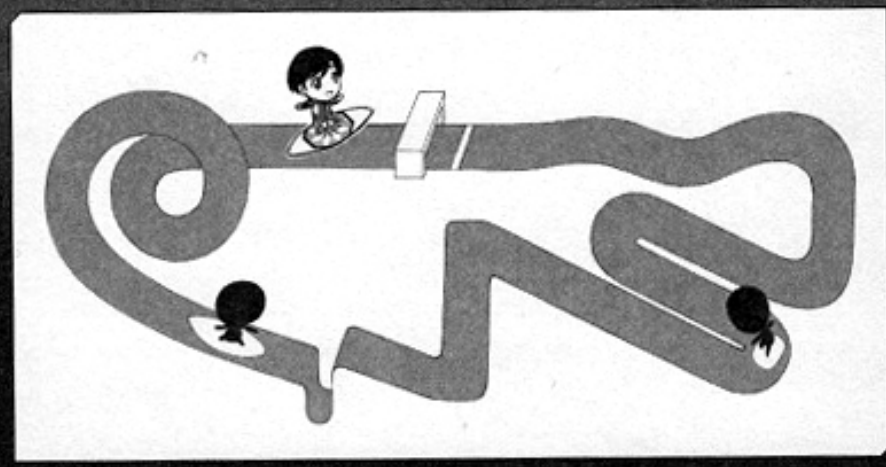
「ステージ」と呼ばれる試合会場で、敵味方各々三名の選手によって「モノリス」を巡り魔法で争う。相手チームを戦闘続行不能にするか、敵陣にあるモノリスを二つに割り隠されたコードを送信することで勝敗が決まる。相手チームへは、魔法攻撃以外の直接戦闘行為は禁止されている。モノリスを割りコードを読み取るためには、無系統の専用魔法式をモノリスに撃ち込まなければならない。その種目内容から、九校戦でもっとも人気があり、白熱する競技である。



バトル・ボード

選手たちからは「波乗り」と略される競技。

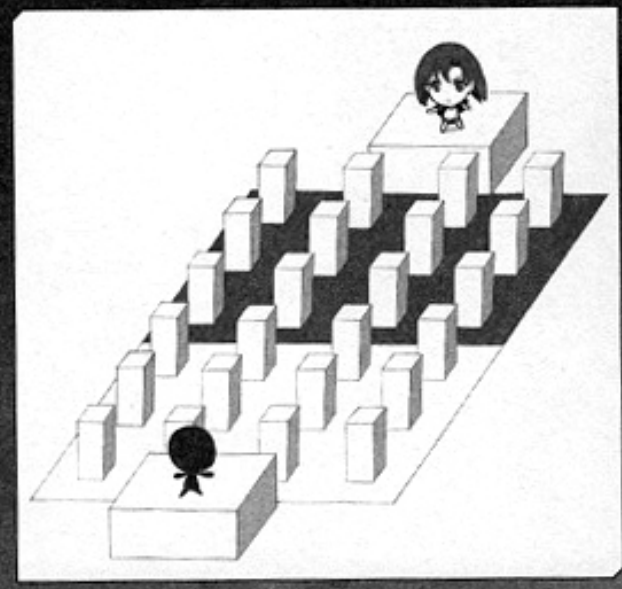
元々海軍の魔法師訓練用に考案されたもので、選手はサーフィンのような一枚のボードに乗り、加速魔法などを駆使して全長三キロの人工水路を三周し、勝者を競うレース。バトル・ボードのルールとして、他の選手に魔法で干渉することは禁じられている。予選を一レース四人で六レース、準決勝を一レース三人で二レース、三位決定戦を四人で、決勝レースを一対一で競う。



アイス・ピラーズ・ブレイク

選手たちからは「棒倒し」と略される競技。

選手は、自陣奥に設置された高さ四メートルの櫓の上に立ち、十二メートル四方の自陣に配置された氷柱十二本を守りながら、十二メートル四方の敵陣の氷柱十二本を先に倒す、あるいは破壊するという競技。選手は純粋に遠隔魔法のみで競い、肉体を使う必要は無い。そのため、この競技に参加する選手のユニフォームは自由で、規制は唯一つ「公序良俗に反しないこと」。結果、昨今では女子のピラーズ・ブレイクは九校戦のファッション・ショーとも言われる。



Chapter 0

There are currently nine national magic university attached highschools throughout the state.

The first highschool is in Kanto (Tokyo). The second highschool is in Kinki (Hyougo). The third highschool is in Hokuriku (Ishikawa). The fourth highschool is in Tokai (Shizuoka). The fifth highschool is in Tohoku (Miyagi). The sixth highschool is in San'in (Shimane). The seventh highschool is in Shikoku (Kochi). The eighth highschool is in Hokkaido. The ninth highschool is in Kyushu (Kumamoto).

These are the only magic highschools in the country. It does not refer to the fact that there are only nine highschools attached to the nine national magic universities, but rather that they are the sole nine highschools teaching magic as the main curriculum.

To tell the truth, the government is more than keen to increase the number of magic highschools. They are unable to do so because they cannot secure enough mages who go on to become teachers.

The first, second and third highschools accept 200 new students a year. The other six can take another 100 each.

In total, that's 1200 entrants. This is the limit to the new number of mages that can be produced per year. It's approximately equal to the number of youth with eligible levels of magic that appear in the population.

But at the same time it's thought that if more ample educational opportunities could be provided, the possibility that even more youth with late budding magical talent could be discovered is not inconsiderable.

The reality however is that the running of just these nine magic highschools fully stretches the human resources of this country. Therefore the only way to address this deficit is to take these 1200 freshmen a year, train them as much as possible, and raise their level to the max. In doing so the number of mages will gradually increase, and in the future it is expected that this positive spiral will eventually fix the dearth of teachers.

One of the measures taken for that are competitions at the school level between the nine magic highschools, to fuel the aspirations of the students. The largest of these is the summer Nine Schools Competition.

It's a nationwide magic highschool magic tournament.

Every year a selection of magic highschool students from across the country meet, putting their pride on the line, and unfold a story of frustration and glory.

With a huge crowd including not only government officials and those interested in magic but also businesses, overseas companies, researchers and scouts, this is the greatest stage for magic highschool students to shine.

This year too, soon, the curtains of that momentous event will be raised again.

Chapter 1

The year 2095 AD, mid July.

The week after the first semester's finals were over for the National Magic University affiliated First High, the students devoted all their energy towards preparing for the Nine Schools Competition during the summer. However, he — Tatsuya Shiba that is — was completely out of tune with such school spirit. This was partially due to the fact that his logical nature overrode his emotions. That being said, the primary reason for his being at school today was because the faculty had summoned him for a meeting in regards to his exam scores.

"Tatsuya."

"Leo..... Why is everyone here?"

Having finally escaped from the Faculty Room, Tatsuya found his classmates Saijou Leonhart, Chiba Erika, and Shibata Mizuki waiting for him outside.

Tatsuya's little sister Miyuki was part of the Student Council, which was currently in the middle of preparations for the Nine Schools Competition in the School Council Room, so she wasn't there.

As if to replace Miyuki, Miyuki's classmates Mitsui Honoka and Kitayama Shizuku were there with worried expressions.

The Faculty Room was located on the teacher's floor, which was separate from where the students usually attended classes.

However, that did not mean students did not pass by.

-- Regardless of whether the passersby were of the same grade or even upperclassmen, everyone snuck glances over at the five people surrounding Tatsuya.

Which was only natural.

They stood out. A lot.

This was not a distinction reserved for today's situation, this was always the case.

Tatsuya had been appointed to the Public Morals Committee even as a Course 2 student and, through his numerous accomplishments during recruitment week, had proved that his selection was no fluke, ultimately resulting in his fame spreading across campus. While his single-handed annihilation of the terrorist organization had not been publicized, his outstanding success during recruitment week was enough to garner quite a lot of attention from his classmates and even female upperclassmen.

Erika was a publicly acknowledged beauty.

Owing to her constant proximity to Miyuki and Erika, Mizuki's appearance seemed to pale slightly in comparison. That being said, her elegant and refined beauty was rated quite highly among male upperclassmen.

Despite being constantly ridiculed by Erika (or maybe "constantly bickering with" would be better), Leo's Germanic features and superb athletic abilities identified him as "someone worth noting" among the female population. (The "pure Japanese style" that Leo referred to would be black-haired and black-eyed.)

As for Honoka and Shizuku, they were two superb students even among the 1st Year Course 1 students. Their appearance would easily qualify within the boundaries of cuteness (Strictly in terms of appearance, Tatsuya would be the most mundane).

Whether they wanted to or not, a group that transcended the Course 1 and 2 boundary and socialized together naturally drew extra attention.

Even so, possibly because this cohort's 1st Year Representative, Student Council member and far famed beauty Miyuki wasn't here, there were actually significantly fewer onlookers than usual. --

The people who paid these glances no heed whatsoever were unexpectedly close by.

For example, this man right here.

"It should be us asking what you're up to, right? Why did you get called to the Faculty Room?"

Hearing Leo's question, Tatsuya immediately understood.

It appeared that his friend was concerned on his behalf. For a moment, Tatsuya contemplated fabricating a reason to divert them, but he changed his mind upon reflecting that they deserved his honesty.

"The teachers interrogated me about the technical skills portion of the exam."

Hearing this, Leo squinted his eyes in displeasure.

"....'Interrogated' sounds a tad suspicious. So what did they ask about?"

"Long story short, they wanted to know if I was tanking the test."

Erika was the first to express her outrage at Tatsuya's answer.

"What the heck? Tatsuya-kun doesn't benefit in the slightest for doing that. Only a moron would ask that."

Erika's observation was not wrong, so Tatsuya could only smile back wryly. It was another story altogether if someone cheated to get a higher score, but there was no point in intentionally getting a lower score. This suspicion was just as ridiculous as Erika surmised.

"However, I can understand why the teachers think this way."

"Why?"

Shizuku's soft words bewildered Mizuki.

"Tatsuya-kun's scores are just that astounding."

Tatsuya did not preen at Honoka's answer, but being overly humble might elicit a negative reaction as well. Unable to decide between the two, Tatsuya could only smile wryly again.

For First High, the final exams for magic high schools included magic theory examinations based on recall and technical skills examinations.

On the other hand, language arts, math, science, sociology and other mundane topics were graded based on daily homework. This was an institution that focused on high quality training for Magicians, so from the school's perspective, having the students focus too much on subjects outside of magic was redundant. (Tatsuya and company made the distinction between Magicians and Magic Artificers only because their training naturally branched out in two directions. Normally, society would

lump Magic Artificers into the same category as Magicians, but would not use "Magic Artificers" to refer to Magic Researchers who could not use magic.)

In terms of magic theory, the mandatory classes covered the foundations of magic learning and magic theory on the test; two additional topics were picked from the electives: magic geometry, magic languages, magic botany, and magic architecture, as well as one selected from either magic history or magic systems theory, for a total of five topics.

Magic technical skills were measured through application ability (the speed of magic design), magic tolerance (the scale of the Magic Sequence), interference ability (strength of rewriting Eidos), as well as the combined Magic Power given from the culmination of all three, thus resulting in four scores.

Students with superlative scores would have their names and ranking publicly announced on the campus website.

The 1st Year students' results had already been announced.

Those who had earned the highest combined scores between magic theory and technical skills were completely as expected.

First Place: Shiba Miyuki.

Second Place: Mitsui Honoka.

Third Place: Kitayama Shizuku only a few points behind.

The first three were all names from Class A, and it wasn't until Fourth place that a male student named "Tomitsuka" from Class B appeared. Beyond that, familiar names included Morisaki at Ninth Place. The first twenty spots were all Course 1 students.

A glance at the Technical Skills portion would yield the same result. While the placements swapped around a little, the first twenty places were still occupied by Course 1 students.

Strictly speaking, First Place was Miyuki, Second Place was Shizuku, Third Place was Morisaki, Fourth was Honoka. Combined score notwithstanding, Class A dominated the Technical Skills portion to the extent that it caused their teachers considerable headache (Class distribution was supposed to be split evenly through A to D, so this sort of academic showing obviously

revealed that Class A grasped the materials for the first semester much better than the other three).

However, when based solely on the Magic Theory portion, an entirely different and astounding picture revealed itself.

First Place: Class E Shiba Tatsuya.

Second Place: Class A Shiba Miyuki.

Third Place: Class E Yoshida Mikihiko.

Honoka was fourth, Shizuku at tenth, Mizuki at seventeenth, Erika in twentieth, while Leo and Morisaki fell out of the rankings.

When separating Course 1 and 2 students, the difference in technical skills played a heavy role. However, the general consensus was that students that scored poorly on technical skills would also have a hard time grasping the theory as well. Because of all the complex concepts, it was very hard to understand the theory without perceiving it firsthand.

Even so, two of the top three were Course 2 students.

That alone was an unprecedented situation, yet Tatsuya's accomplishment was even more amazing. His average in the theory portion — not the total — was easily a dozen points higher than the second place score, leaving him in sole and undisputed possession of First Place.

"Even if theory and technical skills are two different things, there should be a limit."

"But I don't believe Tatsuya-kun would tank his score."

After Shizuku objectively expressed her opinion, Mizuki countered back in a displeased tone.

"Of course Shizuku knows that."

"But the teachers aren't like us, since we know what kind of person Tatsuya-kun is."

Honoka and Erika both started to smooth things over.

"Yeah, they only know us from the other side of the terminal screen....."

Just as Leo said, this was a major deficiency in modern education. Even if modern teachers personally came to the lecture hall like teachers from the previous century, it still wouldn't guarantee that they could fully understand their students.

To address this problem, the school had created opinion boxes to replace last century's office hours system.

"......How about asking Haruka-chan?"

Counselors handled the situations where students were unsatisfied with the school or other on-campus incidents. Discounting whether the label "Haruka-chan" was appropriate, the suggestion itself bore merit, but Tatsuya sharply shook his head.

"I talked with Ono-sensei yesterday. In truth, she informed me about all the major questions they would ask today."

"Such an unreliable teacher."

"Don't be that way. New counselors don't possess much in terms of authority anyways."

It was Tatsuya's turn to smile gently and comfort the irritated Erika.

"......Tatsuya-kun must've been even harsher than me, right?"

As Erika guessed, Tatsuya's words were considerably more confrontational.

"Whoa?"

Erika's precise retort caused Leo to elicit a strange noise.

"......What is it?"

Erika squinted as she asked.

"This woman is actually capable of saying something serious."

Leo widened his eyes as he softly muttered to himself.

"Silence!"

Erika smacked him with a rolled up notepad.

As a matter of fact, even in an age where digital information was so common, notepads were still prevalent. Especially for magic-based schools, during the teaching of magic languages, the very motion of "writing" was in itself an important act. Since teachers primarily used pictures and diagrams in magic geometry, using a notepad to record the drawings was vastly easier compared to using a terminal, so magic high school students were more likely to carry notepads than students from normal schools. That being said, the exact reason why Erika carried around a notepad despite not being in class remained a mystery.

"Ow....."

Leo was unable to dodge the incoming blow from the notepad and crouched down, holding his head in pain. It wasn't like he was just sitting there taking the hits without trying to resist, but currently, Erika's smiting speed was much greater than Leo's evasion speed, so (?) in this situation, whenever he unilaterally decided to butt in, he would be unilaterally smote.

".....You violence addict, my head isn't a drum!"

Leo lodged a serious protest, which was casually ignored by Erika.

Probably due to the fact that this scene had endlessly repeated itself over the last three months, Mizuki only let out a helpless smile and left them to it, rather than panicking like she had in the beginning. Also, she used this to redirect the tangent back to the original topic, avoiding any possible escalation of the conflict.

"Tatsuya-kun, did you solve the teachers' misunderstanding?"

"Well, yes, on some level."

"On some level?"

At Mizuki's concise question, Tatsuya supplied further details with an unwilling expression on his face.

"The teachers understand that I wasn't intentionally getting them wrong, but they still advised me to transfer."

"Transfer?"

"Why? Why would they do that?"

Mizuki and Honoka both shouted out with their faces completely pale, while the other three wore similar expressions.

"Among the Nine Schools, Fourth High is renowned for their specialty in Magic Research, so the teachers suggested I transfer there. I declined, of course."

Two people let out sighs of relief, while two others looked furious.

The former two were Mizuki and Honoka, the latter Leo and Erika.

The last member of this conversation wore an unreadable poker face.

"......So if someone doesn't excel in technical skills, then they should join a school that doesn't emphasize technical skills at all. Isn't that completely self-contradictory for a school? I can understand if someone's grades were bad and they couldn't keep up in class, but that's obviously not the case with Tatsuya."

"Probably because he's an eyesore. Maybe Tatsuya-kun knows more about magic than the teachers themselves."

"Relax, you two."

If left alone, Leo and Erika would only feed off each other's fury, so Tatsuya stepped in to extinguish them.

"It's just as Leo said, barely passing is still passing, so there's nothing that would necessitate a transfer. It's possible that the teachers only had my best interests at heart. Regardless, even if that was the case, these best interests possess no empathy, and are solely in place to protect themselves."

Tatsuya's soft tone did nothing to cover his acidic assessment, causing the originally furious pair to shrink away. This was precisely the cooling effect that Tatsuya aimed for, though the method may be called vile. But alas, the result was not the most ideal.

"At the end of the day, I think that teachers shouldn't be mistaken in the first place."

Just as everyone was hesitant towards what to say next, Shizuku spoke up in a singular manner that was neither supportive nor critical. From the way

her comment relaxed the tension caused by Tatsuya's mocking words, the overall effect would probably be categorized as supportive.

"Fourth High doesn't scoff at technical skills, but when compared to the combat-centric magic that would be expressed in the Nine Schools Competition, they are more interested in further intricate techniques. The more complex the procedures the better."

"Is that so? Shizuku-chan, you know quite a lot about this."

"That's because my cousin studies at Fourth High."

Hearing Shizuku's answer to Mizuki, Honoka and the other four people said "So that's how it is" as they nodded. Given that this came from a student attending Fourth High, this should be a reliable source of information.

As everyone professed agreement to these words, they also sprouted considerable mistrust towards the teacher that summoned Tatsuya.

However, this group of individuals wouldn't focus their attentions on a stranger (the teacher) who wasn't with them at the time.

"Speaking of which, it's almost time for the Nine Schools Competition, right?"

Leo probably recalled what Shizuku was saying earlier, to which Tatsuya nodded at his inquiry.

"Miyuki is already complaining. There are a lot of things to account for, including vehicles, tools, and uniforms."

"Isn't Miyuki-chan also participating in the competition? That sounds tough."

Mizuki wasn't being overly polite, but she was honestly concerned on Miyuki's behalf.

"However, Miyuki should be able to cruise during the newcomers' competition, so the preparation work should be more intensive."

Erika replied in a manner that half supported and half refuted the earlier sentiment.

"Don't be overconfident. The scion of the Ichijou Family started attending Third High this year."

Shizuku's objection was a little off the mark. The official and newcomers competitions in the Nine Schools Competition were separated by gender, so there was no way Miyuki would go against the young master from the Ichijou Family.

That being said, no one intentionally retorted at this.

"Is that so.....?"

"You say Ichijou, as in Ichijou from the Ten Master Clans?"

From their heartfelt expressions of surprise, this appeared to be the first time Erika and Leo found out that someone in their year was descended from the Ten Master Clans. Mizuki didn't seem too astounded, maybe she knew something about the "scion of the Ichijou Family".

"That might be a tough opponent. That being said, Shizuku you sure know a lot."

"Shizuku is a die hard fan of 'Monolith Code', so she watches the Nine Schools Competition every year, right?"

Honoka, who knew Shizuku as well as she knew herself, answered Erika's question.

".....Hm, yeah."

Hearing Honoka answer for her, the normally expressionless Shizuku nodded in slight embarrassment. Honoka owed Tatsuya a favor, so it wasn't surprising for her to be interested in Tatsuya. However, Shizuku was different; she only knew Tatsuya because her best friend Honoka was interested in him, as well as the fact that he was Miyuki's older brother. Initially, Shizuku had only commented from the periphery, but gradually she had lowered her guard and started expressing herself openly.

"Now that you mention it, besides the All-Japanese and the International University Intramural, 'Monolith Code' can only be seen at the Nine Schools Competition."

Standing diagonally across from the embarrassed Shizuku, Tatsuya nodded upon hearing Honoka's answer, wearing an expression that signified that he understood that sentiment.

The Nine Schools Competition was an inter-school competition between high schools affiliated with magic universities. In other words, it was an internal competition that happened to be open for public viewing.

That was because the Nine Schools Competition was one of the few stages that provided magic competition as entertainment.

Every year, a total of 1200 students entered their first year at the nine magic high schools.

In comparison, there were anywhere between 1200 and 1500 young men and women of age 15 every year who developed enough magic talent to be accepted.

In other words, for the youths that manifested magic talent, if they aimed to become Magicians or Magic Artificers, almost every single one of them would enter one of the nine magic high schools.

Hence why the magic competitions at the high school level, besides kenjutsu, martial arts, and a few others, were completely monopolized by the nine magic high schools.

In order to allow the general public to better understand and become invested in magic competitions, as well as to further society's acknowledgement of magic, the Nine Schools Competition had become one of the few major events to propagate these ideas.

"Our toughest opponent this year is going to be Third High, right?"

"Probably."

Knowing this to be Shizuku's area of expertise, Erika specifically asked for her opinion. In response, Shizuku simply nodded happily.

"And this year you're not in the audience, but one of the contestants, right?"

Shizuku was Second Place in technical skills for their year, so even if the official roster hadn't been publicized yet, Shizuku was like Miyuki in that they were guaranteed to be selected.

"Yeah....."

Hearing Mizuki's question, Shizuku quietly nodded in response, her face illuminated with motivation.

◊ ◊ ◊

After finals were over, Tatsuya spent almost every afternoon in the HQ of the Public Morals Committee.

Immediately after summer vacation, the election for the new Student Council President would be held.

After a new President was elected, a new Public Morals Committee would be selected, along with its new corresponding Chief based on the new elections.

According to tradition..... More like according to bad habits, there had never been a smooth transfer between Chiefs of the Committee. More often than not, the unorganized activities record and current members were tossed to the incoming Chief to handle.

-- That being said, after Mari took over as Chief during her first year, there would be no problem with the transfer the following year. --

However, the 2nd Year students in her Public Morals Committee had insufficient experience, so Mari wished to minimize the confusion during the transfer of power between Chiefs.

—Regarding all the documents necessary for the transfer, Mari tossed that responsibility to Tatsuya.

"I'm starting to think I'm a goody two-shoes....."

"A goody two-shoes that's bad to the core? I think this dual nature of yours is quite interesting."

"....."

This comment was overly pertinent, rendering Tatsuya unable to reply.

"However, this time I'm very grateful for your good side, since without your help, we would only be repeating past disasters."

Mari comforted him in this way probably because she felt a little guilty seeing Tatsuya silently plugging away at his work.

Yet, Tatsuya did not possess split personalities, nor was he merely helping to organize the material. He was the only one organizing the materials.

These words achieved no comforting effect whatsoever.

"Even so, you've started preparing for the transfer very early?"

Tatsuya asked a piercing question without stopping his hands from their work.

The documents he was preparing would be completed in a week.

If no further input of additional details was needed, this would create a two month buffer zone.

Also, there was no guarantee that major events or incidents would not occur during this time period.

This wasn't the type of material that should be created as soon as possible.

"Once we start preparing for the Nine Schools Competition, we won't have the time to compile this. There's a mountain of things to do, from verifying the roster, training, adjusting equipment, gathering and analyzing data, to devising strategies."

All these things had nothing to do with Tatsuya.

"......When is the Nine Schools Competition going to be held?"

That being said, cutting off the conversation here would be awkward, so Tatsuya focused all his attention back onto data organization as he asked this.

"Ten days, from August 3rd to the 12th."

"That's quite a long time."

"Hm? You've never seen it?"

"Yeah, since I've always been busy with errands during summer vacations."

Tatsuya's answer thoroughly confounded Mari.

"But according to Mayumi, your little sister goes to see it every year, to the point that she even remembers what events we competed in....."

Tatsuya almost burst out laughing.

"No, it's not like we're attached at the hip 365 days a year..... Occasionally we move separately as well."

"Eh? .....No, that's true. It's just that whenever we see the two of you, it's like you're always with each other."

"Speaking of which, we're usually on our own at school."

After Tatsuya objectively pointed this out, even if Mari's expression revealed her incomprehension, she nevertheless still accepted it.

"If that's the case, no wonder you were completely lost when I started talking about the preparations for the Nine Schools Competition."

"Yes, to be honest, I don't even know what competitions are being held. I only know about 'Monolith Code' and 'Mirage Bat'."

While it was true that he was multitasking between making conversation and creating the data files, this only served as a refresher for Tatsuya. And for Mari, who was currently idle — or more like the one who didn't want to do anything — this was a good way to pass the time, so Tatsuya was more talkative than usual.

"That's because those two are the most famous....."

Mari tilted her head, as if she didn't know where to start. She held her fist before her mouth, as if she were about to cough (but didn't actually make the coughing sound).

"The contests in the Nine Schools Competition focus on the events in athletic magic contests that require more Magic Power."

"This I know."

Tatsuya replied without stopping his fingers from working.

"In the past, they would change the events every competition, but recent years have seen the same contests every year.

There are six contests: 'Monolith Code', 'Mirage Bat', 'Icicle Destruction', 'Speed Shooting', 'Crowd Ball', and 'Battle Board'.

Kenjutsu, Chinese magic martial arts and other combat related contests, as well as athletic competitions like gymnastics and basketball are held at a different event."

"Don't 'Crowd Ball' and 'Battle Board' rely heavily on physical abilities?"

"Yes. Magicians are only human, so there's no reason to undervalue physical capabilities. Even in 1 on 1 duels between Magicians, there are cases where the individual with the superior physical abilities has emerged victorious. I'm sure I don't need to elaborate on this point."

"That's true."

Tatsuya knew this very well, so his agreement with Mari's words was truly heartfelt.

"Of the six contests, only 'Monolith Code' is a team event, the other five are solo acts."

"Isn't 'Crowd Ball' a two man show?"

"This is where the Nine Schools Competition gets evil. In order to emphasize the importance of Magic Power, this contest has a solo performance rule. I have a booklet that summarizes the rules. Want to take a look?"

"Sure, I'll take a look later."

Tatsuya stopped typing and accepted a small booklet from Mari.

"Huh, a hard copy. How strange."

"Anything related to the Nine Schools Competition wouldn't be surprising. Virtual terminals would hurt the Magic Power's conceptual foundation. On the other hand, besides Magicians, there are very few people that actually use substantial terminal devices, and the number of Magicians using virtual terminals has also increased (decreased?)." (!)

"I see, so that's why the Nine Schools Competition uses hard copies instead of terminal devices."

"Eh? So Tatsuya-kun prefers the usage of virtual terminals?"

She probably heard the critical elements in Tatsuya's undertone.

With Mari's normally brash manner and her amusing tendency to be "poor at organizing", it was easy to forget that she was a very perceptive individual.

Tatsuya took this under consideration and selected his words — without stopping his typing motions — more prudently.

"There is some basis that virtual terminals negatively impact Magicians that have not reached maturity. Especially for students under twenty that are still developing their power, I think they should avoid using virtual models. But for adult Magicians whose Magic Power has been fully developed, I don't feel that there's any reason to stop them from using virtual models."

"......That's another way to look at it. Forcing adults to abandon the efficiency gained from virtual models simply because it poses harm to children seems a little overkill."

There was a brief lull in the conversation. Tatsuya was busy reviewing the information he inputted on the screen, so he had no way of discerning Mari's current expression, but he guessed that she would be considering his earlier comment.

No matter how ridiculously she usually acted, there was no way for her to disguise her inner sense of righteousness.

For some reason, that fact caused Tatsuya to smile a bit.

"......We've drifted off topic."

Mari seemed to have arrived at some conclusion of her own, before she turned the conversation back to the Nine Schools Competition without any forewarning.

"The competition is separated into the Official and Newcomers Divisions, each requiring 10 men and women, for a grand total of 40. Only 1st Year students may participate in the Newcomer Division while the Official Division has no restrictions. That being said, each contestant may perform only in two contests, so no 1st Year student has ever competed in the Official Division. Even if it weren't in the rules, there's no way for 1st Year students to stand up against the firepower of a 2nd or 3rd Year student.

Until last year, the Newcomers Division was not separated by gender, but from this year onward, both the Official and Newcomers Division will be. Also, until last year, no 1st Year female student had to compete in multiple contests, but that may be unavoidable this year."

Mari's words were out of concern for Miyuki, which was obvious without naming her aloud.

Continuously participating in magic competitions was extremely taxing on the female body. Even though Miyuki had undergone training beyond that of a normal person, her physical stature was by nature more feeble. It would probably be best that he provided as much aid as he could, Tatsuya thought.

"Of the six contests, four are not gender specific. 'Monolith Code' is men only and 'Mirage Bat' is women only..... Since 'Monolith Code' is the only event where live combat is guaranteed, it's not surprising that the event is men only."

Mari might have been saying this, but her facial expression clearly didn't agree.

According to the information Tatsuya gathered from the Public Moral Committee, Mari's magic specialized in anti-personnel combat, so she must have resented being excluded from this particular event.

"The maximum number of participants per contest is three from each school, with men and women calculated separately. So for both the Official and Newcomers Divisions, five men and women have to select two of the five events while the other five can participate only in one.

As for deciding who competes in which events, that is based on whether skilled contestants should only focus on emerging victorious in one event, or maximizing profit by applying for two events, and then there is considering where the opposing aces will go, and who they will go up against..... Since this is a team-based competition, all of these details are very important."

"Of course."

"Besides the contestants, the Nine Schools Competition allows each school to bring four people as tactical advisers, but not every school takes advantage of this option. Our school always brings the maximum amount

of personnel each year, but schools such as Third High opt to waive the tactical support when competing, relying solely on their contestants to decide their tactics."

"Yet, ironically, they are our toughest opponent."

"We've only lost to them twice, once three years ago and the other time seven years ago. The Nine Schools Competition switched to a summer format ten years ago. Since then, there have been 9 competitions. Our school has been the champion five times, Third High twice, and Second High and Ninth High have each won once."

"I believe this year's goal is for a three-peat?"

"That's right. For us 3rd Year students, securing the championship is the true victory."

Currently, the 3rd Year students at First High were known collectively as "the strongest era".

Saegusa Mayumi, Juumonji Katsuto, Watanabe Mari.

Two of them were directly connected to the Ten Master Clans, while the third possessed similar talent.

Just the fact that all three of them were in the same year at the same school was an amazing coincidence. In addition, the campus also boasted several students that were qualified for Rank A in high school (they were unable to obtain their licenses due to limited experience, but their raw ability alone was sufficient for their ranking based on international standards).

Even before the official roster for the Nine Schools Competition had been announced, First High was already seen as the favorite to repeat as champions.

Even if the underground gamblers were using the Nine Schools Competition as a setting, no one was taking odds for First High. That was how overwhelmingly powerful their group was.

"I hear that if everything goes according to plan, our school's victory is a foregone conclusion?"

"Probably. There are no concerns on the contestants' end. Even taking the Newcomers Division into consideration, as long as there's no major mishap, we should win off the points from the Official Division. If there were any real concerns, I'd say it would be engineers."

"Engineers? You mean people responsible for CAD maintenance?"

"Exactly, except the official term from the Nine Schools Competition is Technicians. The CADs used at the Nine Schools Competition must be universally adaptable, so only models that fit the criteria are allowed. On the other hand, there are only restrictions on the hardware itself, there are no restrictions on software. How well individual CADs can be synchronized to the appropriate contestant and whether the maintenance can bring out the contestant's maximum potential are absolutely decisive in determining victory."

How fast an Activation Sequence initialized was entirely reliant on the CAD's hardware, but the efficiency of Magic Sequences was heavily influenced by the design of the CAD's software. Given that a single second could spell the difference between victory and defeat in athletic competitions, a properly devised software program was of vital importance.

By no means did this imply that the more intricate the design was or the more processes that were used, the better the software became. Software that surpassed the processing power would cause more harm than good by obstructing the hardware itself.

Given that there was a glass ceiling for hardware, the selection and allocation of software became even more important.

Tatsuya believed that, under these conditions, the competition results could change dramatically based on the engineers' skills.

"Right now, there's a dearth of talented engineers in 3rd Year when compared to qualified contestants. Mayumi and Juumonji are capable of maintaining their own CADs so they won't have problems during the competition, but....."

"....."

In other words, Mari did not excel in this category.

Tatsuya accurately read the inference behind Mari's vague words but, precisely because he understood, he chose to say nothing.

He allowed his attention to drift away from Mari's small talk and focus back onto the data files.

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Improvements in central control of public transit had led to the complete overhaul of the trolley system, with trolley cars becoming the primary source of public transportation within the city proper. The cars on the tracks were completely controlled by a central operating room in order to ensure safety, ease of access, and the ability to combat the high volume demanded.

On the other hand, the advancement of the public transportation system had not proceeded as planned. The program for connecting all the highways had already been inputted into the system, but most of the normal roads and expressways within city limits were still controlled by the city and had not reached a national level.

In comparison, the AI for driver assistance had improved dramatically.

As long as they hadn't been illegally modified, modern cars were incapable of causing accidents even if they tried. (Katsuto's car was able to directly impact Blanche's HQ because that was a military model.)

Vehicles exported to other nations also possessed the same AI system, allowing smaller countries to also benefit from this system even though they didn't have the capability to develop it themselves, which in turn lowered the frequency of accidents even further. From an international standpoint, individual control systems trumped central control systems.

Despite this, there was still a price to pay. New drivers — or to put it bluntly, bad drivers — wouldn't run the risk of causing accidents, but it was easier for them to cause traffic jams. Even if consecutive crashes could be avoided, there was no avoiding situations where everyone slammed on the brakes, so this result was only natural.

To prevent this — at least on the outside — even if there wasn't a pressing need for safety, driver's licenses were still mandatory.

Next to his new electric bike, Tatsuya was waiting for his little sister to arrive.

Tatsuya had purchased this bike after obtaining his license in early April. Though the purchase was strictly for practical purposes rather than for joy rides, the bike had still accrued considerable mileage. Even so, Tatsuya regularly maintained the bike every day, so even after two months, the bike was still in mint condition.

"Onii-sama, sorry for the wait."

Upon hearing the voice, Tatsuya shifted his gaze over as the headlights illuminated his sister's slim body.

Miyuki's long hair was done up in a bun while she wore a biker's suit in the same fashion as Tatsuya's own. The custom fit suit hugged her curves, hinting at the fullness of her womanly charms.

As Tatsuya put the helmet on Miyuki's head, Miyuki smoothly lifted her chin. His little sister's seemingly natural motion caused Tatsuya to wryly grin, but he still buckled on the chin strap for her.

Miyuki shrank her neck as if ticklish, to which Tatsuya responded with a smile as he put on his own helmet before climbing aboard.

He took out his goggles, then motioned Miyuki to hold on tight.

Tatsuya verified that Miyuki was holding on to his waist and that she was pressed against his back before adjusting his goggles and raising the output of the continuous motion device (equivalent to the gas pedal of motor vehicles).

The electric bike that the siblings rode sped away beneath the night sky.

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Their destination was Yakumo's temple.

However, the one training tonight was Miyuki and not Tatsuya.

Miyuki had already been selected as a participant in the Nine Schools Competition, so additional preparation was necessary.

The events in the Nine Schools Competition heavily emphasized the need for magic talent, but at the same time did not wholly ignore physical characteristics. In the "Battle Board" event, contestants with faster reflexes and a better sense of balance held the advantage, while the "Crowd Ball" event required a good balance between tactics and stamina.

For Miyuki, who excelled in Speed and Freezing Magics, "Icicle Destruction" was almost specifically designed to show off her talents. Forget the Newcomers Division -- she could probably cruise to victory even in the Official Division.

However, with the individual contests split by gender causing the number of events to increase, Miyuki was also going to participate in the "Mirage Bat" event, where she would have to "use a bat to split open the balls of light floating in the air".

Miyuki also received martial training from Yakumo alongside Tatsuya, so her frail frame belied her superb physical status. Even so, given that there weren't many opportunities lately for her to exercise, this training served as a precaution for the main event.

Tatsuya turned off the engine near the entrance before pushing the vehicle into the temple. After leaving the vehicle in the temple garage, the two of them went to greet Yakumo.

At this hour, Yakumo should be doing night training with his disciples.

Just as they expected, as they approached the darkened dojo, they could detect various concealed presences, as well as the occasional footstep that couldn't be completely muffled and the sounds of bodies hitting the floor.

Tatsuya slowly pried open the ancient doors to avoid distracting the disciples from training.

Even though the door opened without a sound, a kunai still came flying towards them. Tatsuya used the blade-proof and bullet-proof jacket to deflect it before pulling out a lead ball concealed in his biker suit and firing back.

However, Tatsuya's "marble" (a type of concealed weapon that is hurtled using finger force alone, from the same system as "point ball") didn't seem like it hit the target.

"Tatsuya, it looks like your marbles haven't improved much. Don't think magic is enough to cut it. You need to practice your projectile weapons as well. However, you made the correct decision in deflecting the kunai rather than catching it."

There was no detectable presence, only the voice.

Tatsuya didn't aim right in front of him where the voice came from, but instead fired a second marble towards the rightmost wall.

"Oh ho?"

Accompanying this surprised shout, a force rippled outwards from the spot Tatsuya aimed at.

Tatsuya quickly put an arm around Miyuki and sprang backwards.

A split second later, a pitch black sword wave slashed down vertically from the ceiling above, barely missing Tatsuya's back by a hair as he covered his little sister.

Tatsuya quickly stepped forward with one foot.

A bokken painted completely black was rendered completely still with Tatsuya firmly stamping on it.

Yakumo abandoned the idea of striking a second time as he let go of his immobile weapon.

"......Sensei, you have such an interesting way of greeting people."

"......I should be the one saying that. Wasn't your marble filled with killing intent?"

Master and disciple faced one another in the darkness, before simultaneously breaking out into evil laughter.

Tucked inside Tatsuya's bosom, Miyuki was blushing furiously. Thankfully, that was difficult to discern in the surrounding darkness — at least that was what Miyuki thought, but Tatsuya had already noticed due to being in contact with her stiff body, while Yakumo had detected this through her erratic breathing.

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Somewhere within the temple, illuminated by torches in the four corners, in a place usually reserved for homa ceremonies (this temple should have been under Hisanyama's jurisdiction, but Tatsuya and Miyuki had never seen Yakumo chant sutras or pray to Buddha), the area was faintly lit by blue light, with orbs glowing with a dim red light softly dancing in the sky.

Because this was a temple, any ignorant passerby may have mistaken this scene for the presence of spirits, but fortunately there was no one else around.

A slender, long shadow passed through the blue light, and one orb of light vanished into nothing.

Two orbs, three orbs; the difference in color started to increase.

That mesmerizing figure was chasing the floating orbs at an energetic and unexpected pace, then swiftly bisecting them with the short rod in her hand.

After splitting thirty orbs, Tatsuya signaled Miyuki to take a break.

The interior only contained a square barrier drawn with quicklime that measured about 11 meters on the side. The raw power necessary to form a barrier by only drawing four white lines was nothing short of astounding. Tatsuya brought a large tea cup towards where Yakumo was standing as he brought down the seals.

Normally, Miyuki was the one responsible for bringing tea to the panting Yakumo, but Tatsuya took over that duty today.

That was because tonight, Miyuki was in a similar state (to Yakumo), as she stood on the other side of the white line.

"Sensei, thank you. Not just for lending the location, but also for training my little sister as well."

After handing the tea to Yakumo, Tatsuya bowed deeply in gratitude, to which Yakumo nodded generously.

"There's a colossal difference between attacking illusions and striking actual targets. Miyuki is also one of my cute students, so there's no way I would decline to help."

There was probably too much emphasis on the word "cute", but Tatsuya decided to let it slide until after the Nine Schools Competition.

Illusion magic was one area where "ninjutsu" excelled, to the point that the speed, accuracy, and movements of the illusions surpassed those created by modern magics. Modern magic had the advantage in terms of speed of activation and variety of spells available, but within specialized parameters, there were many areas that could not compare with Ancient Magic.

Tatsuya only had access to a few magics, so he was unable to use Yakumo's illusion "Will O'wisp" to replace projectors.

"Miyuki, should we stop here?"

Tatsuya asked as he handed a drink to his sister who was still panting, but Miyuki shook her head and took a sip to wet her throat.

"If sensei is okay with it, I want to continue."

"I don't mind, though shouldn't Tatsuya also give 'Will O'wisp' a try?"

"No, I..... will pass."

Tatsuya could approximately guess the reason behind Yakumo's smirk.

Tatsuya briefly entertained the idea of spoiling Yakumo's fun, but refrained after taking into account that Miyuki's training took precedence.

"Is that so? Eh, oh well."

Yakumo revealed a truly regretful expression, but that wasn't enough to hide his mischievous smirk.

Seeing this, Tatsuya was certain that declining the earlier offer was the right choice.

Yakumo transformed his evil smirk into a kind and approachable smile as he turned back to face Miyuki.

"Then let's begin."

"Yes, sensei."

Miyuki bowed to signal that she was prepared to continue.

Tatsuya had long since recovered their respective tea cups.

Just as Miyuki stood in the middle of the square anchored by bonfires and Yakumo was about to start casting illusions.....

"Who's there?"

Another person's presence entered the scene.

The one who called out was Tatsuya.

No, the order was actually reversed.

To supplement the training, Tatsuya linked his sensory ability to the information dimension, allowing him to quickly catch wind of a foreign element being introduced into the area. The moment Tatsuya challenged the silent patch of darkness, another person's presence abruptly materialized.

"Ah, Haruka."

Yakumo greeted the presence in an unconcerned manner.

Tatsuya and Miyuki were both familiar with this name.

The figure that walked into the flickering light possessed a much more mature aura than Miyuki.

She was the counselor from the Magic University affiliated First High — Ono Haruka.

Likely due to the fact that she was wearing the same dark bodysuit that Miyuki was wearing, it seemed that the curves of her chest and waist were more accentuated than usual.

As Miyuki followed the direction of Tatsuya's gaze, a trace of concern flashed across her features. However, before she could nudge her brother with her elbow, she noticed the cold, steely gaze in her brother's eyes and swiftly regained her composure.

The reason why Tatsuya was carefully scrutinizing Haruka's body was to ascertain Haruka's physical capabilities.

"Tatsuya, no need to be so wary. Haruka is also one of my students."

"But you weren't nearly as kind during my training as compared to Shiba-kun."

Haruka's voice was slightly mocking, which jarred against her dangerous appearance that could easily be swallowed in the darkness.

"That being said, I know that sensei is another story, but to think that I was discovered by Shiba-kun, has my technique regressed so much?"

"Haruka, lying to yourself isn't a good habit. If you lie too often, you will lose track of your own thoughts as well."

"Shiba-kun said the same thing to me."

"Oh, looks like I said something unnecessary. Anyways, let's set this aside for now. Haruka's cloaking was almost perfect, so there's no need to stress about that. If you really think that your skills have regressed, that is."

Haruka revealed a model perfunctory smile and accepted Yakumo's hinted gaze.

She shouldn't be able to get off that easily, nor should she have planned to do so in the first place.

Seeing Yakumo's smirking expression, this was probably how the two of them normally interacted.

"Tatsuya didn't detect your presence normally. He has a pair of special 'eyes' that are different from ours, so if you want to fool him, you need to disguise your presence rather than try to hide it."

"I see..... I'll take that under advisement."

"It's your turn to answer my question."

The two of them were acting out a master and disciple discussion using Tatsuya as the subject. Unable to harness his irritation, Tatsuya intentionally broke in with a displeased tone.

"Hm..... It is unfair to give only Haruka information. You don't mind, right, Haruka?"

Yakumo intentionally let out a "Hm....." sound to create an opening, but given his current attitude, it was obvious that he was calculating when Tatsuya would interrupt them. In response to Yakumo turning the conversation towards her, Haruka immediately shrugged her shoulders and replied,

"Even if I said no, you guys would probably discuss this when I'm not here, right?"

Essentially, Haruka had already given up on hiding.

"Since the person in question has given her consent, then I'll go ahead..... Haruka is an investigator for Public Safety."

Yakumo's explanation was very simple, as just this alone would be sufficient. Even so, Tatsuya hoped that Yakumo would take it a step further.

"Hm? You don't look very surprised."

However, Yakumo posed a question of his own.

It appeared that he was expecting the Shiba siblings to be astonished.

Not just Tatsuya, but even Miyuki accepted Haruka's real identity without batting an eyelid, which surprised Yakumo considerably, or perhaps it would be more appropriate to say that it disappointed Yakumo considerably.

"I have my own information network, so I know that Ono-sensei isn't military. Ruling that out, the only possibilities were Public Safety (Police Department of Public Safety), Internal Affairs (Cabinet Agency of Data Supervision), or foreign spy."

Tatsuya's answer caused Yakumo to furrow his brows.

"Rather than saying information network, it's more like 'he' provided you with that information. Is that okay?..... Given his position, he may be dishonorably discharged for leaking confidential information to a high school student."

That being said, Yakumo's perfectly calm expression clearly showed that he wasn't overly concerned.

"In terms of position, sensei is roughly the same..... So, Ono-sensei is Public Safety's undercover agent in the guise of a counselor to investigate the anti-government activities centered around Blanche within the First High campus, did I get that right so far?"

"No."

Tatsuya asked this to verify his hypothesis regarding Haruka.

But Haruka responded with the definite negative.

"It's true that I'm Public Safety's undercover agent, but I didn't disguise myself as a counselor. In chronological order, my current superior approached me while I was thinking about becoming a counselor, and I became a special investigator for Public Safety after I arrived at First High. Two years ago, I spent one year under Yakumo-sensei, so Tatsuya-kun is actually my senior."

"Even though you only studied for one year, your cloaking ability is quite proficient."

"That is my magic specialty, even if I can't use any other magic. This is also the reason why my superior rates me highly."

"......I see, you're a BS (Born Specialized) Magician?"

"I dislike that term."

Haruka pouted and turned her head like a young school girl throwing a tantrum, causing Tatsuya to break into a smile.

BS Magicians, also known as BS ability users, could also be called innate ability users or innate magic specialists. This was because they excelled at a particular ability, but because of this extreme specialization, they were unable to use magic techniques like other Magicians on the same level.

As could be seen from the malicious label "the 101 tricks of BS users", BS Magicians occupied a lower social stratum than normal Magicians, but their unique ability was practically impossible for other people to imitate. Even if someone could accomplish this, they were unable to replicate the same level of quality BS users were capable of. If properly matched with their specialty, they often outperformed the generic "omnipotent" Magicians.

"Rather than being a jack of all trades, I'd rather be a master of one. However, that's a matter of Haruka-sensei's perspective."

As soon as Tatsuya said this, he realized that the student and counselor positions had been reversed. However, given that this was off campus and they certainly weren't in class at this hour, this shouldn't have been a problem.

Probably noticing the same thing, Haruka stopped her tantrum, but she was still unhappy with the situation.

"Shiba-kun, this was a special circumstance, but my identity as a secret investigator remains highly classified, so please don't tell anyone else."

Tatsuya's immediate reaction was that there was little meaning in doing so.

If she was only an undercover agent for Public Safety, the Ten Master Clans would know anyways.

Erika, whose family had close ties with the police, likely knew already.

Likewise, Tatsuya had long since caught on to the fact that Haruka was an agent of some kind, he just hadn't been certain which organization she was affiliated with.

It was entirely possible that Haruka was the only one who believed her identity was a secret, but Tatsuya didn't verbalize this.

He merely replied to the request in this fashion:

"I understand. I'll keep it under wraps. Though it might be presumptuous to ask for this in return, but if something similar to what occurred in April is on the horizon, could you let me know the details ahead of time?"

"......That's fine. Let's go with that mutually beneficial relationship."

The two of them shook hands, each nursing their own agenda.

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It went without saying that besides magic, magic high schools still fielded a full curriculum.

This included physical education, which involved using competition to light the flames of youthful ardor to ridiculous levels, a scene that had yet to change.

Today's class activity was football.

The encyclopedia's entry was as follows: This is a sport derived from soccer, with similar rules, that is played on a field surrounded by a large box with numerous tiny holes in it. The only notable differences are that players wear a head protector, and head and hand contact are prohibited. (Also, the competition format where players "compete in a transparent box" was one of the defining characteristics of post-2080 AD athletics.)

Occasionally, this contest was also held with magic involved, but generally magic was ruled out, and today was no exception.

Football was played with a lightweight, highly resilient ball that bounced off the walls and ceiling. The ball rebounded left and right at high speeds, much like a ping pong ball, as players chased after it in order to make the shot against the opposing goal. It was a sport that demanded both incredible agility and considerable strength. In addition, the highly stimulating exercise was a popular sport for "entertainment".

The female students from 1st Year Classes E and F were currently taking a break and, completely ignoring their own curriculum, were busy cheering on the male students.

"Move, move, get outta my way!"

Leo was charging towards the ball that no one was covering.

The ball used in football was highly dynamic, so it was extremely difficult to dribble with it, hence that action was rarely seen. Generally, the five players on a team used the walls or ceiling to make passes, so the energy expended by recovering the ball often decided victory or defeat.

"Tatsuya!"

Crossing the entire field, Leo passed the ball to Tatsuya in midfield with the force of a shot.

If he tried to trap the ball with his chest or abdomen he might be knocked to the floor, so Tatsuya kicked the ball directly upwards, allowing the ball to

lose some its force from the rebound on the ceiling before trapping it neatly beneath his foot.

After receiving this pass with machine-like efficiency, Tatsuya sent the ball careening off the wall, using the rebound to pass the ball.

Along the axis of the rebound stood another slim youth. Rather than calling him slender, he may have been more accurately described as well-built. Currently, he fearlessly received Tatsuya's high-speed pass in one motion.

And immediately shot on the enemy goal.

The electric chime signaled the goal, accompanied by the cheers of the watching female students.

"That guy isn't bad."

Leo bluntly praised the youth as he stood next to Tatsuya.

"Yes, accurate prediction of the flight path, and his appearance belies his agility."

Tatsuya was faintly surprised by the boy's physical abilities which surpassed his expectations. They had been in the same class for 3 months, so today wasn't the first time they were in physical education together. Tatsuya previously believed that he had an accurate grasp of the boy's abilities on some level, and his earlier pass was adjusted accordingly, but this person's — Yoshida Mikihiko's — actions showed that he was more than meets the eye.

There were a mere 25 students in class, so it was natural that everyone knew each other's names.

Also, Tatsuya knew more than just a name.

Yoshida Mikihiko came from a prestigious family renowned for Ancient Magic — he was a direct descendant of the Yoshida Family.

The Yoshida Family possessed an Outer-Systematic Ancient Magic called "Spirit Magic", and it was rumored that they passed on their traditional methods of training as well. Given that it was a traditional method of practice, arduous labor was probably at the center of it. If so, members of that family would naturally possess highly capable physical specifications.

The cause of Tatsuya's surprise was that Mikihiko's appearance gave no hint of this whatsoever.

Specialists that excelled in concealing their power always pop up in the most unexpected places.....

With that in mind, Tatsuya sent the incoming pass spiraling towards the enemy goal.

With Tatsuya and company dominating the floor, their team easily cruised to a crushing victory.

Tatsuya returned to the observation area and sat down with Leo near Yoshida Mikihiko.

"Nicely done."

By the time Tatsuya spoke up, his breathing had become perfectly even.

"You guys as well."

Just like Tatsuya, Yoshida Mikihiko's breathing wasn't ragged.

Tatsuya hadn't formed social links with every classmate, likely because his personality was the type that usually ignored others. This caused a portion of his peers to see him as a cold individual, so only about half of 1st Year Class E was willing to converse with him. However, Mikihiko was even more extreme in his aloofness and, including himself, Tatsuya had never seen him speak with any of their mutual peers. On enrollment day, he was the first one to leave the classroom by himself. Even Leo, who moved in social circles much broader than Tatsuya had, only nodded to Mikihiko in passing until now.

"Yoshida, you're pretty good. Don't take this the wrong way, but I was quite surprised."

Mikihiko's performance seemed to have reminded Leo of something, so he asked Tatsuya — Tatsuya extended the greeting first, but it was Leo who had suggested it — to sit near Mikihiko.

Leo's welcoming tone might have caused some people to think he was being overly familiar.

"Mikihiko."

That being said, it seemed that Mikihiko warmed to Leo's direct attitude.

"I don't like it when people refer to me by my family name, so just call me by name."

Before, he never replied in such a friendly manner.

"Okay, then call me Leo."

Even if the number of those full class activities from the previous generation had decreased, it was still strange to have this sort of conversation 3 months into the school year.

Mikihiko's school life was just like that, caused by the towering wall he erected between himself and the rest of the class.

Maybe this was only brought on by the exhilaration following strenuous exercise, causing him to be in a more generous mood, but this most definitely was an excellent opportunity.

"May I call you Mikihiko too? You can of course refer to me as Tatsuya."

"Okay, Tatsuya."

Mikihiko replied in a comfortable tone, but his expression was slightly embarrassed.

"Actually, I wanted to talk to you a long time ago."

Impressions are a curious thing. Sometimes first impressions are impermutable regardless of what you do, but other times a single sentence is sufficient to dramatically change an impression you held until this moment.

In Tatsuya's mind, Mikihiko's impression turned from "anti-social" to "shy".

"What a coincidence, that makes two of us."

They entered the school as Course 2 students — replacements, but were still able to secure the top and third scores in their entire year. Even if the school emphasized technical skills, it was impossible for the two of them not to take interest in the other.

".....Somehow, I feel excluded."

The thing was, first ignoring the fact that Mikihiko didn't know them very well, Leo didn't think Tatsuya was interested in this classmate solely on the strength of his scores. Rather, Leo noticed that there was something odd between the two of them, thus leading to the feeling of exclusion.

However, Mikihiko's next sentence swiftly dispelled that notion.

"Leo, you worry too much, I wanted to talk to you too."

The reason was not because of any real conversation, but because Mikihiko was at heart a kind person, as could be seen from his comforting words.

"No matter how you slice it, anyone with the patience to deal with Erika is a rare find indeed."

It was Mikihiko's turn to emotionally express himself.

"......That's a little hard to swallow."

Leo's face grew longer the more he heard Mikihiko talk about Erika like they were a couple, which caused both Tatsuya and Mikihiko to burst out laughing. However, Tatsuya had a few reservations about Mikihiko's comment as he recalled the reason why Mikihiko drew his attention in the first place.

"So Mikihiko, you knew Erika a while back?"

There was no ulterior motive behind this question. So when Tatsuya saw Mikihiko's "Uh oh!" expression, he quickly changed the subject.

"Kind of, I guess we're childhood friends?"

"Erika, why the question mark at the end?"

Given that the person in question was present, Tatsuya's concerns quickly faded.

"We met when we were ten, so technically we're not childhood friends. To top it off, not only has he been avoiding me in class, we haven't seen each other outside of campus for the last six months."

Erika's answer to Mizuki's question suddenly thrust her into the middle of Tatsuya and company's conversation.

"Hey, Tatsuya-kun, what do you think?"

Afterwards, Erika suddenly sought Tatsuya's opinion in her usual as-she-pleased manner.

"This should count as childhood friends, right?"

On some level, given the way Tatsuya responded with no hesitation whatsoever, the same charge could be leveled at him.

Yet, the reason why Leo and Mikihiko were unable to utter a single word wasn't because they were struck speechless by Erika barging in without any consideration to others. Their widened eyes clearly testified to this point.

In 2095 AD, fashion and proper decorum demanded that any trace of exposed flesh be covered in public. Since school was considered a public environment, even if it was in summer, women were still obligated to wear jackets and a colorless, impenetrable pair of tights or leggings beneath their dresses.

That being said, these rules didn't apply to athletic uniforms, so athletic clubs suffered no penalty or criticism for revealing their hands or legs with their uniform, and physical education classes were also not bound by this rule. For example, Tatsuya and the other male students were currently wearing shorts that did not extend to their knees while Mizuki was wearing a fairly long pair of rhythm pants, which was the standard uniform for physical education.

On the other hand, Erika was.....

Both of her legs were completely uncovered.

From the thighs down, everything was revealed to the sweltering summer air. Her pants had no length to speak of whatsoever. Finally, the T-shirt she wore barely extended over the pants, giving the impression she was wearing only her underwear.

Her tight thighs showed no signs of coarse muscle; their reddish tint caused by the sun only served to embellish and accentuate their original white caliber.

"Erika, why are you dressed like that?!"

Mikihiko finally reclaimed his wits as his voice spiked, though the unavoidable blush on his face had nothing to do with the UV rays the sun was giving off. There were plenty of opportunities to see a pair of legs outside of school, so it wasn't like Mikihiko was a complete prude, but the "coquettish" air that Erika's legs were giving off was enough to cause almost any of her male peers to lose their composure.

"What? This is the traditional women's athletic uniform."

It was obvious with a single glance what state Mikihiko's mind was currently in, except Erika never mentioned it at all as she tilted her head sideways and replied back with a surprised expression on her face. It certainly didn't look like she was dressed like that solely to tease her childhood friend.

"That's traditional?"

That being said, the man of the hour thought this was all to tease him, as could be seen from Mikihiko's face that colored even more in fury.

"Is that so? I thought this was some unique design for the rhythm pants."

Tatsuya interjected to change the pace and to prevent Erika from unintentionally pouring more fuel on the fire.

"This isn't a pair of rhythm pants."

Saying this only changed the victim from Mikihiko to Tatsuya, but one glance at Tatsuya's stoic face was sufficient to tell that he far surpassed Mikihiko in composure and patience. No, it might be more appropriate to say that Tatsuya wasn't sensitive enough to fall for Erika's provocations.

"But, these aren't tennis briefs either, right?"

"Even I'm not interested in wearing just the briefs and not the skirt. These are called bloomers."

"Bloomers? Sounds like brooms. Did they used to wear those while cleaning?"

"Don't be stupid! Didn't I just say these are athletic uniforms for women?!"

It was difficult to tell if Tatsuya was intentionally playing ignorant, which put Erika in an awkward position.

"Speaking of bloomers, are these it?"

Leo finally came around.

"During the Age of Immorality, when female high school students received allowances from middle aged men to....."

.....However, regardless of whether it was for him or Erika, this was undoubtedly a bad time for Leo to recover.

"Idiot, shut up!"

Beet red, Erika exploded in outrage. At the same time, she raised one foot and furiously kicked Leo in the shin.

Leo bent over and grabbed his shin in pain, while Erika pranced around holding one foot.

This verbal and physical exchange looked to have ended in mutual defeat (?).

Compared to the earlier — Tatsuya and company's — contest, this one went back and forth.

Both sides repeatedly claimed the lead from the other.

The two teams were of equal strength, but were restricted to the caliber of high school students.

There were very few female students watching, since they had their own lessons and could only ditch for so long. On top of that, physical education classes differed from magic technical skills class in that most physical education classes had instructors available. (The difference in raw number of teachers available between magic classes and normal classes could be seen here.)

"I can't believe you. Is your brain stuffed with that type of nonsense?"

Now, only Erika and Mizuki were present to watch the boys' contest.

"Shut up, that's what the books say."

At Erika's scornful look, Leo realized that his position was rather bleak, so he replied rather flippantly and never dared to look her in the eye.

Not striking someone while they were down was one of Erika's merits.

"I have no idea what books you're reading..... Speaking of which, Miki was looking at me in the same way. Is this really that arousing?"

Maybe she was just easily distracted.

"Erika..... I think you'd be better off wearing rhythm pants too."

Given Mizuki's reluctant tone, she probably belonged to the "I think but can't say" category.

"That's true..... It's not as flexible as I imagined, and a little too tight too."

At that, two male students quickly turned around, but thankfully (?) Erika didn't notice.

"Hm~. When I dug this up in the cabinet, I thought that no one had worn this and the measurements were perfect, but I think I'll go with Mizuki's suggestion and change back to rhythm pants."

"Yeah, I think that's for the best."

This wasn't exactly what Mizuki was aiming for, but she nodded in emphasis regardless.

"Hm?"

Mizuki was half a beat late on the uptake, but from a certain perspective that suited her personality perfectly.

"By the way, Erika, who is 'Miki'?"

With his head still turned, Mikihiko's shoulders grew tense, but Erika didn't notice as she leisurely pointed at his back. (Even if she did notice, would she have opted for a different action? This remained a profound mystery.)

"Because he's Mikihiko, hence Miki."

Mikihiko spun around almost at the same time Erika uttered those words.

"What do you mean 'hence'?"

It looked like Mikihiko was unable to ignore this "nickname".

"Why do you ask? Miki is short for Mikihiko."

"I've said this countless times! Don't call me such a feminine name!"

Unfortunately, Erika seemed inured to such scolding given the way it bounced off her.

"Eh? So you prefer Hiko-kun?"

Erika's face adopted a "Why didn't you say so earlier?" look as she rounded on Mikihiko.

"Why is this happening! Don't unilaterally decide to shorten other people's names!"

"So you want me to call you Mikihiko? Eh~..... Mikihiko Mikihiko Mikihiko Mikihiko..... That's too big a mouthful, I don't want to call you that."

Mikihiko wasn't the only one who thought this was ridiculous.

"Don't you feel embarrassed by it?"

"What do you mean embarrassed?"

Erika suddenly bent at the waist.

"Mikihiko....."

Erika brought her face directly in front of the sitting Mikihiko and softly murmured his name with a melodious voice.

His fury forcibly overwritten by other emotions, Mikihiko was struck speechless.

"....Who is that?"

It wasn't just the person in question, but even Leo was wavering. Quite the impressive destructive power.

"Well? Isn't it embarrassing?"

Erika's hair seemed to grow at an accelerated rate; she had entered school with her hair cropped short, but after three short months it had already grown to shoulder length. She tucked her hair behind one ear and revealed a delighted smile.

No matter how obstinate Mikihiko was, even he wasn't able to quell his wavering heart.

"In..... In that case....."

"Ah, stuttering....."

Mizuki softly whispered. Her personality was probably the more merciless one.

Fortunately, Mikihiko didn't have the excess mental capacity to hear Mizuki's words.

"Just call me by my family name!"

"Eh? I thought Miki hated other people calling him by that?"

That comment had been made too rashly.

Mikihiko's face tightened.

His red, panicked face and attitude were the same as before.

In addition, there was a deep sense of shame tucked beneath the anger.

However, Tatsuya felt that Mikihiko currently hid dark emotions that bordered on hatred.

"Erika, isn't it time for you to go?"

At the risk of being a busybody, Tatsuya interposed on this conversation and directed Erika's attention onto himself. Tatsuya discreetly pointed behind him where the coach (the physical education teacher) was glaring over at them.

"Shit! Tatsuya-kun, see you around!"

"Eh? Erika, wait for me!"

Erika hurriedly took off, with Mizuki quickly following.

Tatsuya waved at their retreating backs with a wry smile on his face.

After an awkward period of silence.....

"Sorry for dragging you in."

Mikihiko spoke in a soft tone with his head bowed. He appeared to have deep rooted issues with his family and while he consciously knew that they existed, there were still momentary lapses in his self control.

"Maybe my interference wasn't needed."

Tatsuya's words weren't merely for comfort, but were spoken from the heart. From what had just transpired, this obviously wasn't the first time this had occurred, and Erika's actions may have been to intentionally provoke Mikihiko. Allowing buried frustration and inner emotions to vent may be the best possible way to prevent emotional scars.

"No, that's hardly the case, especially since we're still in class."

However, the reason Mikihiko spoke of was exactly the reason why Tatsuya interfered. Any course of action had a proper time and place, especially since Tatsuya didn't want to become mired in Mikihiko's..... Or maybe Erika and Mikihiko's ongoing issue.

"That being said, Tatsuya is certainly a calm one."

Mikihiko abruptly changed the topic, possibly because he shrewdly detected Tatsuya's "not interested in getting entangled" mood.

"What brought this up?"

Given the conversation up until this point, Tatsuya understood that Mikihiko might portray a certain attitude in class, but he was actually very sensitive to others' moods and emotions. It was just that this change was too abrupt, to the point that any sense of logic was lost.

"What do you mean what.....?"

Mikihiko hadn't properly formulated his thoughts before speaking up, so he wasn't able to properly convey his meaning.

"Well..... I mean, you saw what Erika was wearing, yet you didn't bat an eyelid."

Even so, his example was still too vague, or quite a stretch.

".....I was somewhat surprised at her dress, but surely it wasn't exposed enough to qualify for that much of a reaction? I thought that it was certainly more conservative than a swimsuit or rhythm gear."

Tatsuya's real thoughts were more along the lines of "what the hell is this guy talking about?", but considering today was the first time they were formally introduced to Mikihiko, and due to the confrontational nature of those words, Tatsuya elected to respond in a more neutral fashion. Anyone who overheard this conversation would certainly have thought that Tatsuya was going on a tangent.

"You don't care because it was less provocative than swimsuits or rhythm gear? Somehow that just strikes me in the wrong way."

From a youthful perspective, Leo's critique was right on the mark. Though Mikihiko raised the question in the first place, even Leo was offering his own abrasive opinion.

".....Tatsuya, you've wilted too much. You no longer possess the hallmark of youth."

Possibly because they both suffered Erika's teasing (?), the two of them mutually selected Tatsuya to be their next target.

"Tatsuya isn't wilted. The bar is set too high with him. With such a beautiful little sister, the majority of normal girls wouldn't be able to attract his attention."

"Hm..... You're probably right, given that this is Miyuki-san we're talking about? When I saw her for the first time during the enrollment ceremony, I wasn't just staring dumbly, I was honestly shocked. I can't believe someone so beautiful actually exists in the world."

"Ho? Tatsuya, he's got an eye on your cute little sister. As her brother, what do you have to say?"

Leo wore a mischievous smile as he interrogated Tatsuya, but the person who answered wasn't the currently beset Tatsuya, but Mikihiko, who had just been betrayed (?) by his comrade.

"Don't be like that. You're reading too much into it. I was just talking about it and I have no plans to take the next step, since just thinking about it makes me shake in my boots. If I were looking for a girlfriend, I'd hope I could find a more relaxing and easy-going partner."

Mikihiko's words led to Leo nodding deeply in agreement — so deeply that his actions looked intentionally exaggerated.

"You're right. Not only that, a hardcore bro-con is hard enough, but to get past the invincible sis-con older brother..... The bar is just too high."

"Leo..... It looks like we need to have another in-depth conversation."

"Uh, no. That would be too terrifying. I don't want to put my life on the line for something like this."

Tatsuya's heavy gaze caused Leo to quiver in an overblown fashion.

Anyone could tell that Leo was acting, but a portion of the shaking seemed to be genuine, a point that aroused great interest from Mikihiko as he gazed at the two of them.

Leo was taller than Tatsuya by a margin.

His limbs were also thicker and stronger.

From his performance during their team competition, their agility should be roughly equal.

Tatsuya was rumored to have studied under a famous ninjutsu sensei, but was he really that capable in a fight?

Enough to overcome his deficit in Magic Power?

Mikihiko wasn't aware why he drew Tatsuya's interest, but he knew from the get go why he was interested in Tatsuya.

Mikihiko was interested in the reason behind Tatsuya's prowess. He was a newly enrolled Course 2 student that could go toe to toe against Course 1 students and triumph. Mikihiko wanted to know how Tatsuya obtained such power.

For Mikihiko, he earnestly wanted to find a way for him to bridge the gap in Magic Power.

A replacement for the "power" he lost a year ago.

Up until one year ago, Mikihiko was held to be a prodigy, the star of tomorrow that the Yoshida family rested their hopes and dreams on.

Within the various magics of the Yoshida family that had been passed down, one of the core techniques lay in "Summoning Magic", a skill that Mikihiko possessed enough talent in to eclipse even his older brother who had inherited the family mantle.

From early adolescence until that accident, Mikihiko had always seen himself as one of the strong, and was thus unable to accept his fall from grace.

He knew he was being overly anxious, and he also realized he was withdrawing himself. That feeling of being powerless was sapping away his energy, forcing himself deeper and deeper into the corner.

This past year, he had been relentlessly pursuing knowledge of the arcane.

He had also been practicing martial arts that he had hitherto been lukewarm towards.

Even so, he was still unable to fill that sense of loss.

So once he learned that Tatsuya was also a student with inferior technical skills and imperfect magic ability, yet was still able to overcome upperclassmen that boasted greater Magic Power, there was no way Mikihiko could not be drawn towards Tatsuya.

A close combat technique capable of overcoming a deficiency in Magic Power?

Mikihiko wanted to let Tatsuya and Leo compete against one another so he could see with his own eyes.

Subconsciously, he also wanted to challenge Tatsuya at one point.

"Mikihiko?"

"Ah?"

That was probably the reason.

Hearing his name suddenly called, Mikihiko fell into a combat crouch.

Seeing his reaction, both Tatsuya and Leo forced a smile.

"Please, is there a need for such a murderous reaction?"

"What is it? I was going to say you've suddenly gone quiet, then you fall into that stance?"

"Ah, no..... I'm sorry, it was nothing."

Mikihiko could only apologize shamefacedly. He originally wasn't adept at social interaction.

The rare friendly atmosphere turned tense and, even though Tatsuya and Leo both tried to lighten the mood, the original cheer never returned even when class ended.

◊ ◊ ◊

For high schools attached to magic universities, the Nine Schools Competition held in summer and the Thesis Competition held in fall were major events. The extravagance of the Nine Schools Competition largely overshadowed the Thesis Competition, making it the single greatest event on the calendar.

The Nine Schools Competition was an intramural contest based on athletic magic competitions. (Besides magic competitions, there were riddle events, table top games, timed maze challenges, and even treasure hunts.) First High also had clubs for every occasion, but since competition was fiercest around the Nine Schools Competition itself, participants were

not only selected from clubs, but anyone deemed capable of winning was selected as a participant.

Thanks to this, preparations for the Nine Schools Competition passed from the Clubs Management Group to the Student Council.

"Even so, it's not like we can ignore the official participants from the clubs. Just deciding who goes on the final roster is going to be a major headache....."

Even Mayumi, who usually mesmerized everyone with her radiant smile, seemed to wilt a little today.

The fingers that held the chopsticks in her bento seemed boneless as well.

Recently, Miyuki was also very busy, but the President not only had to handle executive tasks, but other tiresome tasks that were not present given her usually sunny mood.

"Thankfully due to Juumonji's powerful assistance in this matter, we finally have a roster nailed down."

Today's lunch and show was Mayumi endlessly complaining about this and that, but it looked like the curtains were finally coming down.

Tatsuya's stomach wasn't weak enough to be upset by such trivialities, but always eating lunch with this as the background music would have an adverse effect on the nerves, so Tatsuya heaved a small sigh of relief when Mayumi stopped grouching.

"However, the engineer problem far outweighs the participant problem....."

.....Or not.

"We still don't have the right headcount?"

Mayumi powerlessly nodded at Mari's inquiry.

"The majority of our students aim to be Magicians, so talented personnel generally gravitate towards technical skills..... Our 3rd Year students are particularly worrisome, with our numbers in the Magic Artificer department reaching dangerous lows. In 2nd Year we have capable people in A-chan and Isori-kun, but our numbers are still insufficient....."

"Isori, eh..... That guy specializes in geometry, so he's stronger in theory rather than maintenance, right?"

"We're long past the point of caring about these things."

It was extremely rare to see both Mayumi and Mari sigh, which said a lot about how serious things were — although using this to evaluate how serious the situation was would be slightly wrong.

"Even if Juumonji and I help out, there's a limit to how much we can do....."

"Aren't the two of you our primary participants as well? If you're too busy worrying about other people's CADs and allow that to affect your own events, that's not something we can joke around with."

".....If Mari could maintain her own CAD, that would lessen the burden a lot."

".....Yeah, we're in trouble."

Maybe due to exhaustion or some other reason, Mari avoided Mayumi's earnest gaze and looked elsewhere.

The atmosphere in the Student Council Room was borderline hazardous to psychological well being.

In order to return to the classroom — that is, to evacuate the premises — Tatsuya signaled Miyuki with a look, then sought a proper opening.

"Rin-chan, can you help as an engineer?"

Even with the chaos surrounding the preparations for the Nine School Competition, Suzune still hung around in the Student Council Room during lunch and was someone Mayumi never failed to invite.

"That's impossible. My skills would only hamper Nakajou and the others."

But was coldly rebuffed each time.

With the apologies to the currently depressed Mayumi, but this was the perfect opportunity to beat a retreat.

Tatsuya glanced meaningfully at Miyuki, then rose—

"Then..... How about we ask Shiba-kun?"

—Just as Tatsuya rose, his escape plan was ruthlessly derailed by Azusa's unexpected attack.

"Hoh?"

Mayumi, who originally had her head slumped on the table, abruptly lifted her head and let out an unintelligible sound.

Azusa, who up until this moment had been venting her irritation at the large flatscreen terminal in front of her — probably deep in the middle of homework — softly sighed as she hit the power button on her terminal and raised her head.

"I heard that Miyuki-chan's CAD is maintained by Shiba-kun. I've seen it before, and its specs rival those of a first-class corporate technician."

Mayumi jumped out of her chair.

Her face was suffused with vitality, as if that earlier dejected scene never happened.

"Blind spot.....!"

The gaze Mayumi directed towards Tatsuya was like a hawk eyeing its new found prey.

That alone was sufficient for Tatsuya to give up halfway.

"You're right..... I can't believe I didn't think of that, how careless."

Now that Mari had joined the fray, he was up a creek without a paddle.

"Speaking of which, he also handled the reserve CADs the Committee owns..... But since he's the only one using them, I never thought about it."

Resistance was futile. Tatsuya was about 90% ready to give up at this point, but surrendering without a fight was against his principles, so Tatsuya attempted some tiny — and most likely fruitless — resistance.

"Earlier I heard the Chief talk about the importance of CAD technicians, but there's no precedent for a 1st Year technician, is there?"

"Everything has to start somewhere."

"Traditions are made to be overturned."

Mayumi and Mari immediately returned fire at a furious rate.

"The two of you may be 'progressive thinkers', but won't the other participants balk at this? I'm a 1st Year Course 2 student, this would leave a negative impression on many people."

This was a little self-depreciating coming from him, but that didn't mean it wasn't true.

"For CAD maintenance, mutual trust between Magician and Artificer is extremely important. A CAD's maximum performance is dictated by the level of the user's mental state. Using a person like me to maintain CADs would lead to severe participant backlash, so I don't think I'm a good candidate....."

Tatsuya's logic also had its own merits, causing Mayumi and Mari to exchange a glance.

However, regardless of what Tatsuya said, the two of them had already seen through his facade.

In order to deliver the final blow to the lazy (?) underclassman that didn't want to take the hot potato and force him to join, the two of them were visually confirming the order of attack (verbal persuasion).

At this time, they received some unexpected reinforcements.

"I was hoping that Onii-sama could work with my CAD while I'm participating in the Nine Schools Competition..... Is that okay?"

Tatsuya froze at Miyuki's completely unexpected betrayal (?).

In a Shakespearean drama, Tatsuya's mood would undoubtedly mirror that of Caesar as he was assassinated — "Et tu, Miyuki (Brutus).....!"

"Exactly! Having a trustworthy and competent technician nearby is absolutely integral for participants to rely on. Well said, Miyuki-chan!"

Mayumi immediately followed up on the attack.

"Yes, if Onii-sama joined the Technician Team, not only I, but Mitsui-san and Kitayama-san could set our minds at ease."

This was the first time that Tatsuya learned those two were entering the Newcomers Division as participants, but he considered them to be the expected candidates.

—This was also him trying to escape from reality.

Obviously, the battle had been decided.

The preparation meeting held after school in the Club Management Center would decide whether Tatsuya officially joined the roster.

There might be a tiny ray of hope, but Tatsuya had long since given up.

The moment Miyuki assented, Tatsuya had nowhere to run. Under the assumption that his confirmation was in serious jeopardy, he actually had to work hard towards ensuring he was nominated and accepted — these were all within his calculations.

No matter what, the situation was utterly depressing.

At times like these, people tended to retreat into areas they excelled in.

Even if he had an outside chance to be nominated, he still took the time to reflect on what he could do, what areas he excelled at, and re-examined his own sense of worth to properly restore his internal balance as a means of self compensation.

This was possibly due to the build up of considerable stress, as it was rare for Tatsuya to fall into this sort of self compensatory trap.

Two-thirds of the lunch period had already passed. Miyuki was engrossed in dealing with the piles of documents and homework, while Tatsuya, who was currently idle while waiting for Miyuki, removed the silver CAD from the shoulder holster and started examining the modules in the cartridge, the buttons for switching Activation Sequences, and other movable parts.

"Ah, you brought the Silver Horn today as well."

Until now, Azusa was completely focused on her homework, but her sharp eyes caught Tatsuya's movement as she inched forward.

Tatsuya slowly shifted his gaze, not towards Mayumi or Mari, but Suzune.

Suzune accurately interpreted Tatsuya's silent inquiry as she adeptly used her brows and the shrugging of her shoulders to express a helpless emotion. In other words, the current Azusa had completely lost interest in her homework.

"Yes, I purchased a new holster, so I would like to get used to it as soon as possible."

Was this what they meant by "being furious after receiving three in the morning, then happy when receiving four in the evening"? Tatsuya was mentally considering this somewhat objective but also very rude train of thought as he shifted his gaze back onto Azusa and responded in a gentle manner. (To supplement, Tatsuya was thinking of what it meant to play fast and loose.)

Azusa's eyes shone brilliantly as she approached him. It seemed that she was not only interested in the CAD itself, but the supplementary equipment as well.

"Eh, is it okay if I take a look?"

Truthfully speaking, Azusa generally avoided — more like was terrified of — Tatsuya. Precisely because of this impression, Tatsuya wanted to smile wryly. However, given the way Azusa was bouncing around like a small animal and unable to calm down, he probably shouldn't treat her too poorly.

This may be a form of popularity — Tatsuya thought as he removed the jacket he wore even in the heat of summer — with built-in cooling systems, of course — and took off the shoulder holster before handing it to Azusa.

"Wow~ It's an original model for the Silver series.

Such an amazing trim would draw incredible lines when drawing and firing.

Something that didn't just cater to high technical skills but also a design that also took the user's skill into account.

Ah, I worship your genius, Silver-sama....."

After she received the holster, Azusa was happy enough to almost rub her face against it.

Tatsuya was barely able to maintain his poker face.

After Azusa meticulously went over every centimeter of the holster — or maybe finally satisfied herself— she returned it to Tatsuya with a pleased smile on her face.

"Shiba-kun is also a fan of the Silver series? If based only on price and specs, the Maximilian Speed Shooter, Russ Type-F, or even Sagittarius series developed by FLT (Four Leaves Technology) are better deals, but the individual customization of the Silver series is so good that no one cares about the price!"

Tatsuya recalled that Mari once described Azusa as a "Device-otaku".

At the time, he was considerate enough to consider this an exaggeration, but after witnessing her behavior today, he reflected that such a nickname was probably inevitable.

From Tatsuya's perspective, if the contrast between price and performance — efficiency, in other words — was too low, then satisfaction would also drop. Even if that were the case, true performance may differ from official documentation. Simply put, qualitative performance that could not be converted into numerical format was also very important. If one could be "satisfied" without making this sort of analysis, Tatsuya considered that to be nothing more than brand loyalty.

That being said, that was a matter of personal values, so if she said she was satisfied, he had no reason to rain on her parade.

"No, I actually have a few connections, so I can buy Silver Series at a discount thanks to my work as a beta tester."

The moment Tatsuya said this, Miyuki's shoulders visibly shook a little as she faced the other way towards the terminal, but no one noticed.

"Eh~! Really?"

The word "envy" was stamped all over Azusa's face.

This time, even Tatsuya's expression revealed a little spasm.

"......Next time I test the new model, would you like me to get you one as well?"

"Eh?

Really?

Like, really, really?

Thanks!"

There was no way for him to fit in a response.

After Tatsuya was finally able to nod in assent, Azusa grabbed his empty left hand with both of her own and shook it up and down.

"......A-chan, relax a little bit."

Mayumi couldn't watch any longer, temporarily stopping her work on the pile of documents to speak to Azusa.

Azusa suddenly stopped.

Filled with trepidation, she looked at her hands.

Her hands were tightly wound around Tatsuya's hand. Azusa felt this not only with her sense of touch, but confirmed it visually as well.

She slowly raised her head towards Tatsuya, then quickly dodged Tatsuya's expressionless gaze and looked back at her hands.

Azusa let go and jumped back as if her hands had grasped fire.

"Sorry, sorry, sorry......!"

"Flushed face" wasn't sufficient to describe Azusa's current state, since her face was red to the root of her ears. She repeatedly bowed towards Tatsuya in apology.

Tatsuya was starting to get really worried that Azusa would keep bowing until she was dizzy, and glanced towards Mayumi for help.

"......A-chan, you can stop now. Tatsuya-kun is a little overwhelmed right now."

Mayumi was probably thinking along the same lines as Tatsuya, so she didn't add to the mayhem (not without cause) and focused on comforting Azusa.

Azusa took a deep breath as she was instructed and finally managed to settle down.

Mayumi let out a helpless sigh before turning back to her work.

Azusa turned an embarrassed smile towards Tatsuya and quickly turned solemn.

"Then, Shiba-kun wouldn't happen to know Taurus Silver in person?"

She asked in this manner.

—It went without saying that she was doing so to cover her embarrassment.

Unfortunately, this question was a very difficult one to answer for Tatsuya.

"......No, I'm not entirely certain."

Electric clamors rang out from near the wall.

The workstation that Miyuki was using activated the alarm by accident.

Everyone hit a typo every once in a while, but it was extremely rare for Miyuki to erroneously activate the alarm.

Both Mayumi and Suzune wore an "Eh?" expression while looking at Miyuki who was facing the wall, but Miyuki soldiered onward as if nothing had happened, so the two of them didn't ask any further and returned to their respective piles.

"......Miyuki-chan actually made a mistake, how strange."

"Occasionally, yes."

In comparison, Tatsuya's response was overly level, but Azusa didn't notice as she returned to the original — the recent —— conversation.

"No matter how much he hides himself, the people in the same lab should know something, right? Unless, he invented everything by himself?"

"......No, I'm certain that would be impossible."

"I think so too. Oh yeah, Shiba-kun, can't you use your 'connections' at the lab to get some more information?"

"......No, the connections I spoke of aren't in that category..... Also, FLT keeps most of their corporate secrets under wrap, so I think it's highly unlikely to get anything out of the lab technicians."

"Oh~ that's true....."

"......I'm sure senpai already knows, but using Informational Manipulative Outersystematic-type magic to uncover secrets is a felony."

"Ah? Nah..... No way, why would I think..... about that kind of thing....."

Tatsuya looked at Azusa with his eyes half closed, causing Azusa's already petite body to shrink even further.

"......It's okay, as long as senpai is clear on that point. I just wanted to remind you."

"Don't..... don't worry about it, of course I know about something like that, Ah, ha ha ha....."

Seeing that Azusa wasn't making a metaphor and was actually breaking out into a cold sweat, Tatsuya took his foot off the gas.

"Speaking of which, why is Nakajou-senpai so interested in Taurus Silver's real identity?"

The CAD Azusa used wasn't FLT's brand either. Even though she obviously wasn't a Silver Series user, why did she care so much about the identity of the developer?

For Tatsuya, this was a perfectly natural question.

"Ah?"

From Azusa's expression, she was completely dumbfounded that Tatsuya even asked this question.

"Of course I care, Tatsuya-kun, I mean, do you not?

This is Taurus Silver.

The first person in the world to develop the 'Loop Cast System', raising the speed of Activation Sequences for Specialized CADs by twenty percent, he also reduced the variability of wireless models from 3 percent to less than 1 percent. Taurus Silver is just that amazing.

Also, rather than guarding his secrets for personal profit, he openly publicizes his findings for the betterment of the magical community as a whole, which makes Taurus Silver even more incredible.

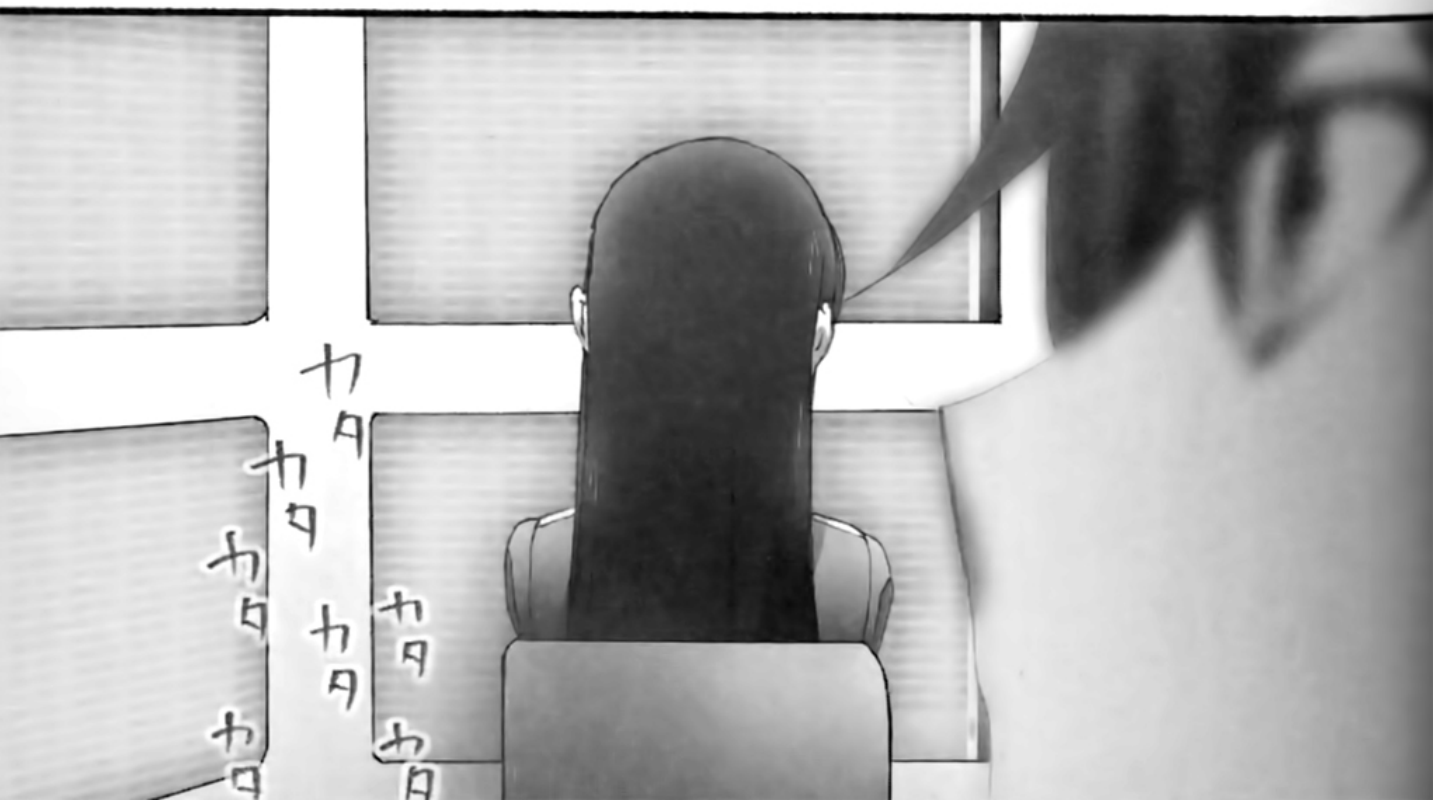
He is called the genius engineer that advanced CAD software technology by ten years within one short year, so I think that no one who aims to be a Magic Artificer would be uninterested in him."

This overbearing pressure that was almost synonymous to scolding forced Tatsuya to shrink back. He was completely caught off guard by how much the world had built up "Taurus Silver".

"Excuse my ignorance. As a user, I'm not dissatisfied with the Silver series, I just wasn't aware that it had such glowing reviews....."

"Ah..... That makes sense, Shiba-kun is a tester, so for you, Silver series isn't all that rare..... Hence why you have a different outlook than I do."

Azusa didn't completely understand, but allowed herself to be convinced.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"Hey, hey, Shiba-kun, let me ask you, what do you think Taurus Silver is like?"

A purely inquisitive gaze.

Wanting to change the subject, Tatsuya replied back trying to stall for time.

"Well..... I wonder how shocking would it be if he turned out to be a Japanese teenager like us."

Once again, electric clamors rang out from near the wall.

Miyuki continued to sit in a posture with her back completely straight as she toiled away.

—But she didn't allow anyone to see her current expression.

"Speaking of which, A-chan."

"Yes, President, what is it?"

In the end, Mayumi finally extended a helping hand towards Tatsuya, who was almost unable to handle Azusa. This might be a little biased, but this was the first time Tatsuya felt like Mayumi was someone dependable. At any rate, Mayumi's stance was that she wanted Azusa to hurry back to her work on the Student Council.

"Weren't you supposed to finish your homework before the end of lunch?"

However, even if this was lending a hand to Tatsuya, this was undoubtedly the knell of doom for Azusa..... That description might be a hyperbole, but Azusa's expression was just so. The very fact that she was engrossed in talking about Taurus Silver was likely a way for her to escape from reality.

"President~"

From the way Azusa tearfully implored Mayumi for help, she was likely doomed.

"Don't make such an embarrassing sound."

Mayumi smiled wryly and turned her gaze from the completed inventory invoice towards Azusa.

"I can help a little bit, so what's your assignment?"

Mari directed a "You're pampering her too much" gaze towards Mayumi, who promptly ignored it — more like pretended not to see it — as she smiled towards Azusa.

"I'm sorry..... It's a report on the 'Three Great Puzzles of Weight Systemic Magic'....."

At this, Suzune, Mari, and Tatsuya immediately turned their gazes on the glum Azusa.

"......W-what?"

Like a deer in the headlights, Azusa shrank into a ball in terror. Her tearful eyes and terrified movements gave the impression that everyone was bullying her, at which Tatsuya turned his eyes away, with Suzune mirroring his thoughts and actions.

Only Mari still stared at Azusa.

"Ho ho....."

Mari watched Azusa with deep interest, though she was more focused on the flat screen terminal in Azusa's hands.

"I was wondering what was puzzling the annual top 5 honor student Nakajou and it turned out to be this."

"Isn't this the topic they ask every year?"

After Mari spoke, Mayumi continued with an uncomprehending expression.

"A-chan, what's this year's prompt?"

Because the prompts were routine, there were already enough prompts that the school was incapable of creating new ideas. This wasn't just homework, it was also one of the primary essay topics for magic university entrance exams. A cursory search would reveal a bountiful harvest of model answers to this prompt.

"The subject of the homework involves how to solve the bottlenecks of the 'Three Great Puzzles'. The first two I get, but I am unable to explain the reason why Generalized Flying-Type Magic hasn't been successfully developed....."

Hearing this, Suzune nodded with an "I understand" expression on her face.

"In other words, Azusa-kun is unable to accept the currently proposed concepts."

"Exactly!"

With Suzune able to express her inner thoughts for her, Azusa nodded vigorously.

"The foundation for magic that can defy gravity and allow the physical body to float into the air has already been laid down by the Four Great Systemic and the Eight Major Types of Modern Magic and has already entered the practical phase."

"Yes, though injury caused by free fall remains one of the major dangers for Magicians."

Azusa shifted her gaze to Mayumi, who supported her argument.

"Magicians adept in Speed and Weight Magics are already capable of leaping dozens of yards at a time, and the world record is held by a Magician who leapt over 100 yards in one try. The record for landing is even greater, with some Magicians able to drop 2000 meters successfully without any equipment."

"If that's the case, why is Flying-Type Magic..... Free movement in the sky still elusive..... Right?"

"To be precise, Generalized Flying-Type Magic that anyone can use remains elusive. There are a handful of Ancient Magic users that can freely fly through the sky."

Suzune added a few details to Mayumi's explanation.

Hearing this, Azusa shook her head, though this was probably an involuntary action.

"That type of magic approaches the unique abilities of BS Magicians. Since it can't be shared, it can't really be called a technique.

Theoretically, you can use Speed and Weight Systemic Magic to nullify the effect of gravity and soar into the sky. In reality, long jump and floating magic have already been developed, so why can't we fly.....?"

"Wouldn't higher level reference tomes contain the answer to this question?"

Mayumi visually interrogated Azusa as to why she couldn't accept the answer chronicled in the books.

"Magic Sequences must include an end point, as the effect of overwriting reality is sustained until the ending conditions are met. While a target object is under the effect of magic, if you want to cause a different type of magic to manifest on the target, you need to use magic that has superior phenomena interference ability.

When using Flying-Type Magic, every time you adjust speed or height, you aren't just overwriting the original magic with a new one, you also need a stronger phenomena interference ability. A single Magician is only able to separate the phenomena rewriting ability into ten segments, so he or she can only adjust the flying status ten times before hitting their limit.

.....This is the publicly acknowledged hurdle to why there's no practical solution to Flying-Type Magic, right?"

Mayumi didn't ruminate very long before nodding her assent to Azusa's long-winded explanation.

"What, A-chan, you've done your research. You've organized all your arguments, so what's the problem?"

"According to this line of thinking, the problem lies in the fact that new magic needs to constantly overwrite the currently active magic, correct? If that's the case, I think that it would be easier to cancel the current magic than activate the new magic."

By now, Azusa had completely shaken off the earlier tearful expression, and was now plunging ahead at a feverish pace. Suzune calmly asked Azusa the next question:

"The theory is sound, but from a practical standpoint how would you cancel the active magic?"

"Why don't you insert a condition for ending the magic during the design of the Magic Sequence? In other words, by preemptively entering a small Magic Sequence into the active Magic Sequence, this can be turned into the ending condition for the magic."

Azusa was immersed in her theory while, conversely, Suzune was calmly stating her counter argument.

"Unfortunately, Magic Sequences are unable to affect other Magic Sequences. Magic Sequences can only be used to affect the Information Body, even if two types of magic are both trying to influence the same Information Body, only the one with the stronger interference strength would actually manifest, as Magic Sequences don't possess a strong versus weak relationship.

Counter magic that can dissolve Magic Sequences do exist, but that's high level magic that directly influences the Information Body. This would be okay at the experimental level, but currently there are no Magicians who can freely wield practical levels of Counter Magic."

"Is that so.....?"

By the time students reached the second semester of their second year, Foundations of Magic class would progress to Applications of Magic. This class started with concepts surrounding "Counter Magic" — magic that nullifies opposing magic — which was what Suzune was explaining right now. Normally, this was something that was taught during the first semester of 3rd Year, which was why Azusa wasn't familiar with the subject. That being said, to hear the term "Counter Magic" and not be hopelessly lost, Azusa's knowledge was broad indeed.

"However, this is still a worthwhile theory."

Azusa's emotions bounced between zealous and gloomy. Suzune smiled at her in a gentle and comforting manner.

"To cancel magic the moment its effects manifest, I believe this is the correct approach."

"That's true. Because of the need to rewrite the activated magic, the necessary interference strength becomes a vicious cycle."

Following Suzune, Mayumi also supported Azusa's theory.

"No one has proposed this until this point, but if a new magic can be activated the moment the currently active magic is stopped from affecting the phenomenon, then there shouldn't be a need for stronger interference strength..... Given that the target is flying in the air, the delay between magics must be reduced to zero, so if a Specialized CAD were used, then

in theory the next magic should be activated before the target starts dropping....."

Mayumi seemed to be muttering to herself, then abruptly made an "Eh?" sound as she turned her head.

"But if it's just removing the effects of magic, shouldn't someone have attempted this long ago? In the end, this is like working with 'Zone Interference' after the fact."

At Mayumi's question, Suzune pulled up the search function on the public workstation located in the Student Council Room.

"Give me a second..... Last year, England attempted a massive experiment based on the same conceptual design the President spoke of. They wanted to use 'Post-Event Zone Interference' to create a practical Flying-Type Magic."

Suzune swiftly located the news articles on magic that contained the information she wanted.

"Then, the result was?"

The inquiring voice was a little high pitched, likely caused by the excitement bubbling out of her, which proved that Mayumi was still a high school student beyond all doubt.

"Complete failure. According to the report, in comparison to the normal situation where magic is repeatedly used, this method only served to increase the demand for interference strength at a geometric rate."

".....Is that so.....?"

At Suzune's report that so betrayed (?) her hopes, Mayumi drooped in disappointment.

"Did they cite a reason?"

"No, the article wasn't that detailed. President, why do you think it happened?"

When asked by Suzune, Mayumi pointed her index finger at her chin and let out a "Hm!" sound as she considered this.

"The previous magic should've stopped functioning by then..... Tatsuya-kun, what do you think?"

The reason Mayumi had asked Tatsuya was to buy time for her to organize her thoughts.

She didn't actually expect him to answer.

"The English experiment provided by Ichihara-senpai has a basic conceptual error."

Thus, Tatsuya's decisive answer completely caught Mayumi offguard.

"......Where is the error?"

Astounded, Mayumi was barely able to ask her question. Neither boastful nor proud, Tatsuya calmly began his explanation.

"Magic Sequences that have not fulfilled their ending requirements will naturally fade with time, but will remain with the target Information Body. When a new magic nullifies the previous magic's effects, the previous magic looks to be canceled, but in reality is merely being overwritten."

Mayumi, Suzune, Azusa, and even Mari were now staring at Tatsuya outright, but Tatsuya remained unmoved by the pressure of their gaze. He remained expressionless and his tone did not change in the slightest.

"Let's assume the previous magic is called Magic Sequence A, while Magic Sequence B is used to nullify the other one.

With the activation of Magic Sequence B, Magic Sequence A loses its phenomenon effect ability. However, even if Magic Sequence A loses its effect, it still remains with the target's Information Body.

Both Magic Sequences A and B are still acting on the target's Information Body, it's just that only the effects of Magic Sequence B are visible. Just as Ichihara-senpai said, Magic Sequences can only affect the Information Body and are unable to affect one another. This is true even in Zone Interference. Unless the original Magic Sequence is itself nullified, using Counter Magic would yield the same result."

"......So the English experiment used unnecessary magic that was not part of Flying-Type Magic?"

Tatsuya nodded his assent to Mayumi's question, then continued his explanation.

"In other words, every time you make adjustments in flight, you would rewrite the Magic Sequence again. In order to maintain flight, the extra rewrites would pile on, so of course you would rapidly hit the upper limit for phenomenon interference ability. The English scholar who designed this experiment must have been mistaken on the nature of Counter Magic."

The portable terminal that Tatsuya wore in his breast pocket chose this moment to start vibrating, signaling the first warning bell for the end of the lunch period.

"Miyuki, let's return to class."

"Yes, Onii-sama."

Miyuki, whose back was to them the entire time, rose immediately upon being called.

Her voice, expression and movements were just as gentle and graceful as usual.

Hence Mayumi, Suzune, Mari, and Azusa hadn't noticed.

Couldn't have noticed.

When Miyuki had been seated before the workstation, her back was ramrod straight with pride, and her fingers fairly danced across the keyboard in pleasure.

◊ ◊ ◊

The preparation meeting for the Nine Schools Competition held in the Club Management Headquarters was suffused with a nervous aura from the onset.

Students with outstanding performance in the events would receive extra credit for their classes. Just for being one of the official participants, students would receive no homework, extra days off and guaranteed straight A's.

Not only did this apply to participants, but to the students selected as engineers as well.

Thanks to the school putting such a high emphasis on the Nine Schools Competition, the students selected as the representatives for the Nine Schools Competition received such incredible rewards. Thus, it was unsurprising that the competition was particularly fierce for the last few slots on the official roster during this meeting.

—If Tatsuya had been merely a bystander, he would probably have viewed the mixed feelings of the surrounding students in a compassionate light. However, he was there as a candidate with a giant target on his back, so he could only depressingly keep himself from sighing aloud while praying for this circus to end quickly.

It was not that he was wholly uninterested in the Nine Schools Competition.

The desire to measure one's personal skills against other Magicians (saplings) of similar age was markedly different from the hunger he experienced while staying in his father's lab and the subsequent desire to bring about practical upgrades to CADs, but Tatsuya still had that much left in him.

Tatsuya was "constructed" to have less emotion than the average person, but he was still at that headstrong age, so no matter what value his peers assigned him, he wasn't shriveled enough to completely not care.

However, at the same time he had to deal with the pride, jealousy, vanity, disgust, and other related emotions in this meeting. That was what truly filled him with melancholy.

Separate from his thoughts — of course — the seats in the conference room were gradually filled. When the last seat was occupied, Mayumi stood before the chairman's podium.

"Then, let's start the selection meeting for the Nine Schools Competition roster."

The meeting for upperclassmen, club leaders for the various participating clubs, Student Council members (Miyuki remained on station in the Student Council Room) and the Club Management Group members who

received the internal notification that they were possible candidates for participant or engineer slots officially began.

Tatsuya sat with the various candidates in the visitors section to the side,

Any organization that exceeded a certain size would naturally contain bigots that swiftly identified Tatsuya as an outsider.

As expected, not long after the meeting began, someone asked what a 1st Year Course 2 student was doing here.

That certainly did not imply that no one looked upon Tatsuya kindly.

There were actually a surprising number of favorable opinions.

The upperclassmen differed from the 1st Year students in that they knew Tatsuya was a special Course 2 student in addition to being a formidable asset to the Public Morals Committee.

Despite this, there were still more opposing than supporting, often in the form of negative emotions rather than objective logic, which caused the meeting to deadlock and waste more valuable time.

"In summation....."

Suddenly, a solemn voice dominated the conference room.

The voice was not particularly loud, yet all the squabbles quickly died away as everyone focused on the speaker.

Juumonji Katsuto, who had hitherto remained silent, cast his gaze across the room before starting to speak:

"In my opinion, the problem lies in that everyone is unfamiliar with what level of skill Shiba possesses. If so, the most efficient solution is to submit that to a live test."

The spacious room was dead silent.

This would bring about a simple and effective result that no one would bemoan, but because of the risk involved, no one had dared to propose this course of action.

".....That's not a bad suggestion, but how do we go about it in a practical manner?"

"Simply having him perform a maintenance right now would suffice."

Mari broke the silence with her question, to which Katsuto provided a simple answer.

"Allow me to be the guinea pig."

The CADs currently on the market had to be intricately synchronized with their respective user after maintenance.

If ten Magicians used the same model, there were ten different methods to adjust their CADs.

The Activation Sequences provided by the CAD would be directly absorbed into the Magician's subconscious domain.

In other words, a Magician's mental state was completely defenseless against their own CAD.

Recent CAD models were equipped with a function that improved Activation Sequence processing, but at the same time made it easier for them to affect the user's mental status.

If there was a problem during maintenance, not only would magic efficiency decrease, other side effects would include discomfort, headaches, dizziness, vomiting, or even major harm such as hallucinations or mental scarring. Thus, the higher the CAD's capability, the more skilled the maintenance needed to be.

For Magicians, voluntarily yielding their CAD to be maintained by an Artificer whose strength was unknown posed a substantial risk.

Even if it was Katsuto's own suggestion, his willingness to offer himself as a test subject showed considerable courage.

"No, I was the one who recommended him, so I should take that role."

Mayumi immediately requested to take responsibility likely out of a sense of duty, but from another perspective, this likely implied that she didn't wholly trust Tatsuya, which was something that Tatsuya easily read between the lines to his discomfort.

"Wait, please let me do it."

That being said, the fact that Kirihara was willing to pinch hit caused Tatsuya considerable shock — the mettle displayed by this man was certainly comforting.

The school's CAD maintenance facility open to faculty and students was located in the Technical Skills Building.

However, this time they weren't using the preset maintenance devices in the Practical Skills Building, but bringing the mobile maintenance devices used in the Nine Schools Competition to the conference room to conduct their test.

The CAD in question was also one that qualified under the regulations of the Nine Schools Competition.

Seeing as how the pre-competition preparations proceeded so smoothly both in materials and procedure, the continuously delayed selection process was a particularly glaring issue.

Tatsuya sat before the maintenance device with Kirihara on the other side — but the two of them couldn't see one another. The members of the Student Council and various clubs leaders crowded around Kirihara.

The first step involved activating the school device, a process during which many malicious gazes were focused on Tatsuya's hand movements, but Tatsuya was long accustomed to working with much more complex devices than the school device, so this was a procedure he could have completed flawlessly in his sleep. He adeptly completed the preparations and adopted a poker face to ward off the abhorring gazes.

"My task involves copying Kirihara-senpai's CAD schematics onto the competition-use CAD, making any necessary adjustments without changing the Activation Sequence, am I correct?"

Tatsuya once again verified the test's contents.

"Yes, sorry for bothering you."

Tatsuya on seeing Mayumi nodding shook his head slightly. Not nodding, shaking.

"......What is it?"

"I wouldn't advise directly copying the schematics onto a different model CAD..... But there's nothing for it, so let's put safety as the first priority."

"?"

Mayumi wasn't the only one dumbfounded. "Copying CAD schematics" was a simple task that occurred when users changed machines, so many other people were also wondering why Tatsuya viewed this as a problem.

However, the Technician Team centered around Azusa knew exactly why Tatsuya asked this question. The team members either nodded slightly in agreement or smirked as they prepared to enjoy Tatsuya's performance.

Tatsuya didn't say anything else and plunged into the maintenance.

First, he connected Kirihara's CAD to the maintenance device.

The schematics replication process was semi-automatic, so there was no way to gauge the difference in skill here.

However, Tatsuya didn't just dump the schematics replica directly into the calculation device of the competition-use CAD, but stored it into the processing area of the maintenance device, a move that caused quite a few people to raise their eyebrows.

Next he measured Kirihara's personal psion oscillation nature.

Following Tatsuya's instructions, Kirihara put the headset on his head, then placed both hands on the examination board.

This was also normal procedure. If this was an automatic maintenance device, the steps required would be to connect the CAD, then read the psion waves, and the process would automatically complete itself.

Generally, students that used the school devices for personal maintenance would adopt that precise procedure.

On the other hand, not relying on automatic maintenance and manually making minute adjustments to the CAD's OS showed an engineer's true strength.

"Thank you senpai, you can take it off now."

Tatsuya indicated that the measurements were concluded and Kirihara removed the headset.

Ordinarily, the next step involved connecting the CAD that needed to be modified, then making any adjustments beyond the automatic recommendations. This required a preset CAD to be prepared in advance, then copying all the data onto the destination CAD.

Just about everyone in the audience thought that Tatsuya messed up the procedure.

As if to prove this point, Tatsuya stared at the monitor without moving a muscle.

However, he didn't give off the air of someone who was hopelessly lost because of a misstep.

His gaze was focused to a terrifying degree without giving a hint of that unsteady feeling.

Unable to contain her curiosity, Azusa poked her head around Tatsuya's body to glance at the monitor.

"Uh?"

Her voice let out an awkward sound that was wholly incompatible with her youthful image.

Tatsuya was completely unaffected by this interruption.

Mayumi and Mari didn't dare to ask what was going on, so they both came to Azusa's side to look at the monitor — and were barely able to contain their gasps.

The monitor didn't display the expected measurement results and graphs, but was filled with character strings scrolling across at high velocity.

The two of them were only able to pick out a few numbers here and there; their eyes were wholly unable to keep up with the scrolling pace.

The numbers abruptly came to a stop.

Roughly a few dozen seconds had elapsed, which was less than 5 minutes since Tatsuya started staring at the screen.

After the character strings stopped scrolling, Tatsuya immediately plugged in the competition-use calculation device and swiftly started hitting the keyboard.

Many windows started opening and closing.

Only Azusa noticed that one of the opened windows was the original document with the recorded measurement results, while another window was the original document that contained the replicated CAD schematics on the maintenance device.

Very few people recognized how insanely advanced the procedure unfolding before their eyes truly was, since the majority of the audience was held spellbound at the unheard of speed at which Tatsuya was hitting the keyboard. Even so, Azusa believed that the truly astounding part was the technique Tatsuya displayed when he was directly reading the nature of the psion oscillations from the original document.

With that method, the engineer could perfectly allocate the resources within the parameters of the calculation device to best suit the measurement results reflected in the maintenance device. This was a completely manual process wholly independent of the automatic processes provided by the system.

Before Azusa's gaze, the settings temporarily stored in the work area were steadily being rewritten in a flash.

The original document still remained on the main screen, but Azusa was barely able to detect the modified settings.

This definitely fell within the boundaries of safety. He was really adhering to the "safety is the first priority" condition.

This way, it would lower the user's risk from relying on automatic maintenance, and provide Activation Sequences that exceeded automatic maintenance in efficiency.

There was absolutely no need for a practical test.

This 1st Year student's skill far surpassed that of anyone in the Technician Team.

Azusa made up her mind right there that she was going to drag Tatsuya onto the team no matter what, objections be damned.

Under the condition "without changing the Activation Sequence" the maintenance quickly came to an end.

He was so fast that the audience wasn't thoroughly entertained.

The next part was the actual live test.

Unnoticed by others, Kirihara's expression was slightly nervous and tense, but fell within the expected boundaries.

In reality, there was no incident, nor was there anything that could even be remotely called an accident.

The CAD Tatsuya modified was "completely the same" as Kirihara's beloved CAD.

"Kirihara, how do you feel?"

"No problem at all. It's just like I'm using my own CAD, there's no incompatible feeling at all."

Kirihara immediately answered Katsuto's question.

Everyone was perfectly clear that this was not an inflated evaluation based on friendship. Given Kirihara and Tatsuya's past history — Kirihara was forcibly subdued by Tatsuya during the kenjutsu club's performance during recruitment week in April — people who knew the particulars were aware that there's no way Kirihara would protect Tatsuya. However, even excluding this "misunderstanding", everyone who saw the way the magic invocated knew that the CAD was functioning perfectly smoothly.

That being said, "able to smoothly invoke magic" was a fairly low criterion and it was hard to see any further results.

".....Looks like he has the fundamentals down, but this isn't enough to qualify him to be one of the school representatives."

"Time spent was pretty average, nothing special."

"He didn't follow proper procedure, but there may be some reason behind that....."

Unsurprisingly, the 2nd Year participants were the first to react negatively to this seemingly normal result.

The backlash wasn't solely from Tatsuya's unprecedented nomination, but also since he was specifically picked by the President, everyone

subconsciously expected him to floor them all with some outstanding technique, so naturally higher expectations led to greater disappointment.

"I fully support bringing Shiba-kun onto the team!"

Abandoning her usual cowed expression, Azusa furiously countered.

"What he just displayed before our eyes was a technique that far surpasses our wildest dreams as high school students. Just the very fact that he doesn't need to use automatic maintenance and is able to do this entirely manually is already a feat that I cannot accomplish."

"......Even if his technique was amazing, what's the point if it's such a mundane result.....?"

"It only looks mundane, but the contents are completely different! To be able to completely abide within the safety parameters at no loss of efficiency is an incredible accomplishment!"

"Nakajou, relax a little bit..... Rather than staying confined within the safety parameters, wouldn't it be better to take a few chances to raise the efficiency rate?"

"That's..... because they suddenly want to test....."

Debate wasn't one of her strong suits, so her vigor quickly diminished.

Just as Azusa was floundering, a male student raised his hand to be recognized, which swiftly brought everyone's attention onto him.

"Kirihara's personal model boasts superior performance to the competition-use models, but even with this difference, the user was still unable to detect any difference, so I believe this technique deserves high praise."

"Eh? .....Hattori-kun?"

Out of the blue, the one who came to the rescue was Hattori.

"President, I also support Shiba joining the Technician Team."

"Hanzou-kun?"

Mayumi was entirely unable to mask her startled expression.

Even faced with the somewhat negative reaction on part of his beloved (?) President, excluding his personal thoughts, Hattori continued fearlessly (on the outside) and graciously extolled his opinion.

"The Nine Schools Competition is an event that affects the very reputation of our school, so we should send the best and strongest candidates, without placing too much emphasis on who they are. The engineer's job is to support the participants so that they can focus exclusively on the events themselves. Just as Nakajou said, for Kirihara to say 'there's no incompatible feeling', I must admit that is a job done admirably well. With our current desperate lack of engineers, this isn't the time to bemoan that 'he's a 1st Year student' or 'this is unprecedented'."

Hattori's words were saturated with verbal barbs, but he strenuously defended his heart-felt position.

However, the very fact that Hattori threw in on Tatsuya's side was a large enough blow to rock the meeting.

"I also think that Hattori's opinion bears merit.

The talent Shiba put on display is more than enough to qualify him as one of the school representatives.

I also support Shiba joining the Technician Team."

With the opposition stunned into silence and Katsuto's public declaration of support, Tatsuya's nomination was certain.

Chapter 2

After the siblings shared their customary dinner together, the telephone picked this precise moment to start ringing.

Speaking of which, as everyone knows, almost all modern telephones were equipped with "web cams", a detail that third rate social commentators never failed to decry, saying that they aren't tele"phones" but tele"screens" or some related but meaningless subject. Even with this projected function brought into fruition, they are still referred to as "telephones".

— Back on topic —

Miyuki was currently in the kitchen cleaning up.

She wasn't adamant on doing the dishes herself since she could pass them to the HAR, but their household wasn't equipped with the 3H (Humanoid Home Helper, or simply "Housework robot") that had just hit the market for mass consumption. The two of them unanimously agreed that having a pair of robot arms extending from the ceiling was more of a hassle than anything, so they were better off cleaning up after themselves.

— Miyuki said that if they were too lazy to do even this, their fitness would rapidly decrease.

— Once again, back on topic —

Simply put, this was the reason why Tatsuya picked up the phone, though occasionally — that's how it was.

"Long time no see..... Did you intend to do that?"

".....Wait a minute, I have no idea what you're talking about..... Long time no see, Special Lieutenant."

Onscreen was a familiar face wearing a very surprised expression.

"It's been two months since we last spoke, but..... If you're using that title, does that mean this is an encrypted transmission? I can't believe you can tap into the civilian line every time."

"It's not that easy, Special Lieutenant. Compared to the standards of an average household, isn't the security surrounding your house a little too tight?"

"That's because there are a lot of hackers active recently, and the household servers have sensitive information stored within them."

"No wonder. We were almost traced on our end."

"You deserved that. As long as you don't delve too deeply into the database, the defense system shouldn't activate."

"I think this serves as an excellent warning shot for my newest switchboard."

Onscreen, the face that had been baptized into coarse leather by long exposure to sunlight and gunpowder revealed a mischievous smile.

As he saw this smile, Tatsuya reflected that the man hadn't aged a day since three years ago.

Based on his rank and department, he must deal with a myriad of details daily, but he never betrayed any trace of exhaustion..... As these thoughts chased one another around in his mind, Tatsuya suddenly recalled that the one on the other side of the line — The Army's 101 Independent Magic-Equipped Battalion CO Major Kazama Harunobu didn't like to waste unnecessary time on small talk.

"Major, what's on the agenda today?"

"That's right, let's cut the small talk. Business first."

"Please go ahead."

"Today we completed modifications on the 'Third Eye'. We upgraded some components to the latest models and updated the software, so I would like you to test it out."

The 101 was pronounced "One Zero One", and not "One Hundred and First".

This was a primarily magic-based experimental detachment that was separate from the normal chain of command. In addition, the Independent Magic-Equipped Battalion was also responsible for the development of cutting edge equipment.

Compared to regular military classification, the security clearance for this detachment was five to six levels higher. Accordingly, a regular high school student had no business interacting with such a division, to the point that he or she would be wholly ignorant of its existence.

However, due to certain classified events, Tatsuya was actually an official member of Kazama's division.

"Understood. I will report in first thing tomorrow."

"......Wait a second, this isn't so important that you need to take a day off from school."

"No, next weekend I plan to visit the lab to test out a new calculation device."

"Although I'm in no position to say so..... But ever since you entered high school, you've been leading a decisively non-student-like lifestyle."

"I dislike your impression, but there's nothing I can do about it."

"That's true..... No matter how busy we get, there's nothing we can do about it. In that case, meet up at the old place tomorrow morning. I'm sorry I won't be there, but I will contact Sanada ahead of time."

"Understood."

Tatsuya saluted in acceptance, while Kazama repeated that action on the screen.

This type of salute went entirely against regulations, but since Tatsuya was an irregular, the standards were slightly relaxed.

"Next subject. Special Lieutenant, rumors say that you are joining this summer's Nine Schools Competition?"

"......Affirmative."

Tatsuya hesitated for a split second, but given the circumstances, the fact that he only hesitated for a "split second" was quite an accomplishment.

It was less than three hours after he had been confirmed as a member of the Technician's Team.

Knowing that asking was fruitless, Tatsuya put a lid on his curiosity and refrained from asking how the Major got the word.

"The arena is located in southeast sector of the Fuji Exercise Grounds, so this is only customary..... That being said, Tatsuya, stay on your guard."

Kazama's everyday speech was already abrupt, but today's seemed even more so than usual.

He wasn't referring to Tatsuya by rank, surname, or alias, but calling him directly by name, which signified that he was warning Tatsuya as an old friend rather than a superior officer. After obtaining the information intercepted by the military's intelligence network, he wasn't alerting the police or the general public, but a mere high school student without any social standing. This was highly odd.

Tatsuya focused all his attention as he continued to listen.

"There are suspicious circumstances surrounding that area, with signs that we have illegal aliens in the area."

"Did someone infiltrate the military's exercise grounds?"

"Quite lamentable indeed. Also, several witnesses claimed seeing East Asian members of an international crime syndicate in the area, which did not occur this time last year. Based on the timing, it's very likely they have something planned for the Nine Schools Competition."

It's just a high school intramural competition..... Tatsuya was about to say this aloud, before switching to another tack.

Even if they were high school students, this country's elite young Magicians were about to publicly compete against one another.

For example, if there was a major terrorist attack using explosives during the awards ceremony, that would severely impact this country's talented personnel.

"You mentioned an international crime syndicate?"

This was not the same type of organization as Blanche (pretending to be an anti-magic political organization) that Tatsuya encountered in April. If this was a criminal syndicate, then they shouldn't have any interest in causing unnecessary harm. Terrorism was another thing altogether.

Kazama was a soldier, so he shouldn't have had any experience dealing with international crime syndicates.

How did he figure out their identity?

"I asked Mibu to give me a hand. You probably know him."

"The father of First High's Year 2 student Mibu Sayaka?"

"Exactly. After retiring from the military, Mibu transferred to Internal Affairs (Cabinet Agency of Data Supervision). He's currently Chief of Foreign Affairs, specifically international crime syndicates."

"......I'm surprised."

Tatsuya wasn't merely parroting back, he was honestly surprised.

Tatsuya was astounded that the Major would reveal the identity of one of his sources of intelligence over the telephone so easily; the Cabinet Agency of Data Supervision generally remained neutral between politics and the military so they weren't particularly friendly with the military, yet the Major simply asked them for assistance in a clear-cut manner, which also amazed Tatsuya. However, what floored Tatsuya the most was that the daughter of a foreign intelligence expert actually became the accomplice to a terrorist organization affiliated with foreign countries and the father who was the chief of foreign affairs merely turned a blind eye to the situation. Salutary neglect, much?

"Criminal syndicates and underground terrorist cells are handled by different departments. Tunnel vision on their own affairs is a common fallacy in government agencies."

The reason why Kazama was able to accurately mirror Tatsuya's thoughts, rather than due to their long friendship, was more because Kazama could also read between the lines and thus resonate with Tatsuya.

"However, information from areas within his expertise is trustworthy. According to Mibu's calculations, these might be members from the criminal syndicate based out of Hong Kong called 'No Head Dragon'. Currently, their objective remains unknown and we will let you know as soon as this changes."

"Thank you, Major."

"I won't see you tomorrow, but we may meet up at Fuji."

"I look forward to that meeting."

"Likewise..... Ho, we talked too long. The new rookie is starting to panic, so it's about time for me to hang up."

The web police probably detected traces of the network invasion. Based on this assumption, it was too ambiguous for Tatsuya to tell whether he should praise the skills of the web police or lament over the skills of Kazama's subordinates.

"Make sure to greet your sensei for me."

"Understood."

"Goodbye."

Tatsuya wasn't able to reply before the screen turned blank.

"That was probably a broad hint that I should make contact with sensei....."

Then, how much was he supposed to reveal? The face of his sensei who owned the title of head monk, but was more appropriately described as "imposter" floated into Tatsuya's mind as he slightly sighed.

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"Onii-sama, if you don't mind, would you like some tea.....?"

Sometime after closing the door leading to the living room, Miyuki's voice came floating in.

She appeared to be trying to avoid eavesdropping on the conversation, so she waited in the kitchen until Tatsuya finished his conversation.

Originally, Miyuki occupied a much more privileged position than Tatsuya and possessed the right to listen in on any military or foreign secrets, but the little sister never exercised that right before her elder brother.

Tatsuya silently padded towards the kitchen and opened the door before Miyuki could ask again.

As expected, Miyuki stood there stiffly with her eyes wide open, with a tray that had a tea kettle and some silverware and snacks perched on top.

".....Onii-sama, please don't scare me like that, you could've said something..... I can't believe you moved silently just to laugh at Miyuki's terrified expression. Onii-sama is bullying me."

"Sorry, sorry."

Miyuki turned her head aside with a huff. Tatsuya smiled as he took the tray from her hands while apologizing every step of the way.

"But I wasn't trying to bully you, I just thought that you were carrying something heavy so I rushed over. I certainly don't want my cute little sister to haul around heavy objects."

".....I know very well that this is a fabrication..... But I'll just let Onii-sama mislead me this one time."

Even if she maintained her displeased expression, the corners of her mouth relaxed slightly.

It only took one word from Onii-sama to calm her down.

But Miyuki was perfectly willing.

"Black tea today?"

"Yes, I bought some excellent summer extract and I thought occasionally having tea would be nice."

Tatsuya nodded in response to Miyuki and returned to the table before sampling the tea cup.

"Muscatel, quite rare..... It must've taken you some time and effort to get this, right?"

"No, it was really a coincidence..... As long as Onii-sama is happy, then that is the highest praise for Miyuki."

Tatsuya slowly took a sip and let out a satisfied smile. Seeing this, Miyuki smiled with a happiness that welled from the bottom of her heart.

"Hm, the tea is excellent and the butter biscuits look delicious. Did Miyuki bake these?"

"Yes, though..... They don't look very nice."

"Nonsense, I don't mind at all, they taste wonderful."

Miyuki ducked her head in embarrassment, but the sight of her Onii-sama raising the butter biscuits and enjoying them was enough to prompt her to raise her head and smile in happiness.

Tatsuya didn't bring up the topic of Kazama's conversation, and Miyuki didn't ask.

Tatsuya was busy sampling his little sister's exquisitely prepared snacks and meticulously purchased tea. For Miyuki, just the sight of her Onii-sama's satisfied expression was more than enough compensation for any arduous task.

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There's no need to repeat this, but Miyuki was the publicly acknowledged honor student.

Not only was she talented beyond all belief, but she also was extremely diligent.

Besides taking care of her Onii-sama's day-to-day life, she also studied until late in the night.

Today also, she studied until near midnight before shutting off the electric monitor and storing it in the table.

She wasn't exhausted yet.

According to her experience, it was hard to fall asleep when going to bed in this stimulated state. This could be quickly remedied with the sleeping device, but Onii-sama frowned upon using the technology that nearly 70% of the country uses. Since Tatsuya objected to this technology, Miyuki would have no reason to use it.

Then let's make another cup of tea to change the mood, Miyuki thought.

It was totally worth it for her to hunt down the best quality Muscatel, as evidenced by her Onii-sama's delight with the tea. Simply reflecting on Onii-sama's smile was more than enough for her to have a wonderful

dream, but if she could see it one more time, and maybe even have Onii-sama rub her head, then that would be even better.

Miyuki was just heading to the kitchen, when a sudden thought crossed her mind when she stopped in front of the mirror.

Miyuki nodded slightly, then a slightly mischievous smirk formed on her face.

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"Onii-sama, this is Miyuki, I'm coming in with tea."

"Perfect, come in."

Miyuki would bring tea or coffee around this time every night and her brother would usually thank her in an apologetic manner, but tonight he seemed to be waiting for her to appear, which slightly bewildered Miyuki.

Regardless, if Onii-sama was waiting for her, that was definitely something that pleased her.

"I was just about to go get you—"

—He got only that far before silence forcibly swallowed the next word.

When she saw her Onii-sama turn around on the chair and stare fixatedly at her, Miyuki felt a small shiver of satisfaction run through her. She carried the tray with one hand while the other lightly clutched the hem of the skirt as she playfully curtseyed.

".....Ah, is this the uniform for 'Fairy Dance'?"

"Indeed, Onii-sama knows very well."

The miniskirt was formed by layers upon layers of dazzling colors that floated together and perfectly matched the tights that covered her beautiful legs along with the bright, leather boots.

The outer garment was open down on the back, made of a translucent material whose thickness was hard to tell. The lines were not embroidered, but naturally created by the fabric itself, allowing it to perfectly complement the bosom.

Beneath the outer garment was a shirt in the same vein as the leggings. No, maybe it wasn't a shirt and pair of leggings, but an entire long-sleeved spandex. If there wasn't the outer covering, it could very well have been mistaken for a figure skater's uniform.

A pair of hair decorations with wings sprouting out the sides held her long silky hair in place, connected by a long thick band seen on most earmuffs.

Considering air resistance and chest protection, this gorgeous uniform was undoubtedly the uniform used for "Mirage Bat" — also known as "Fairy Dance", one of the most anticipated magical events in the Nine Schools Competition.

"How does it look?"

Miyuki placed the tray on a nearby table before spinning around with a smile.

Even though the softly flowing miniskirt was very short, when matched with the fluttering hair dancing in the air it created an aura of impossible grace.

"Devastatingly cute, suits you perfectly, and your timing is excellent."

Miyuki stopped twirling when she faced Tatsuya and grabbed with both hands the hem of her skirt in a deep curtsey as Tatsuya complimented her.

"Thank you Onii-sama for your praise.....?"

Miyuki was 100% certain that her elder brother would praise her, so she only prepared one response, as one response was all that was needed.

However, she was unable to comprehend what Tatsuya's last words referred to, so she altered her response to include a question mark at the end.

Miyuki straightened her legs and waist before "looking up" to the seated Tatsuya.

Just as she was about to direct her gaze towards the usual height to inquire the meaning of "your timing is perfect", Miyuki quickly realized something was wrong.

She just as quickly grasped the reason.

Even though Tatsuya was seated, his gaze was still level to his normal standing height.

Miyuki swiftly glanced downwards, then swallowed hard.

The chair that was supposed to be beneath him — was gone.

Tatsuya's right leg was crossed over his left and his right elbow was directly perpendicular atop the right knee, like he was stretching the upper half of his body forward..... As he sat in mid air.

"I also wanted Miyuki to test out this calculation device."

Tatsuya maintained this position as he slid towards Miyuki until he was roughly an arm's length away before stopping. He then uncrossed his legs and straightened his feet much like how he would rise from a chair.

With this series of motions, his physical body naturally returned to earth

".....Flying-Type Magic..... Sustained Gravity-Control Type Magic has been completed!"

She was only distracted for a split second.

Miyuki nearly pounced on her brother as she seized his hand in joy.

"Onii-sama, congratulations!"

This was one of the magics that Tatsuya had been researching for some time.

Among the Four Great Systemic and the Eight Major Types of magic, the first category is the "Speed/Mass" System.

This was morphed out of the simplest of Super Powers, commonly acknowledged to be most basic magic in modern systemic magic.

That being said, while Flying-Type Magic is theoretically possible under the Speed/Mass Systems — Sustained Gravity-Control Magic, even though the basic proposal existed since the early days of modern magic, it was never successfully developed in official channels before this day.

Today during lunch, Flying-Type Magic was the subject of considerable debate. Modern magic's general consensus was that while the theory was sound, the practical application was impossible.

Even so, another cornerstone of modern magic laws was overturned before Miyuki's eyes.

"Once again Onii-sama has turned the impossible possible! To be able to witness this turning point in history, and the fact that the person who accomplished this towering achievement is my elder brother, I am extremely proud to be called your sister!"

Her hands tightly clasping Tatsuya's right hand, Miyuki looked ready to throw her arms around him, while Tatsuya gently covered his sister's hands with his left.

"Thank you, Miyuki. Although they didn't intend to use it solely towards flying, Ancient Magic has already reached this level of flying capability, but today we took another big step towards realizing the goal."

"The flying abilities of Ancient Magic can only be used by a small minority of Magicians and are a unique ability that depends on the subject, right? However, isn't Onii-sama's Flying-Type Magic usable by anyone with sufficient Magic Power?"

"At present, I have set that as the first objective. I hope Miyuki will help me test this."

"Delighted to!"

Miyuki's eyes shone as she nodded quickly.

After listening to the instructions, Miyuki looked towards the newly maintained CAD in her left hand.

Just like Miyuki's regular CAD, this was a model shaped like a mobile terminal.

However, the dimensions were much smaller than Miyuki's originally tiny model and could be comfortably obscured within her slender palm.

The only similarity was the overall shape of the mobile terminal model.

This CAD was a Specialized Calculation Device.

Miyuki wasn't familiar with Specialized models, but the operation was simple enough.

There was only a power switch and, once activated, the CAD would automatically absorb psions from the user in order to continuously fuel the Activation Sequence until the power was exhausted. On some level, this was a fairly barbaric item.

However, the psion consumption rate for the device had been lowered to the absolute minimum.

The purpose behind the design was to minimize the stress placed on the user.

"Begin test."

Her throat quivered slightly from the overwhelming nervousness she felt.

The fact that her hand wasn't trembling was enough for Miyuki to want to congratulate herself.

Even if the test failed, Onii-sama wouldn't blame her.

Rather, Onii-sama would likely redesign the "Flying Calculation Device" from scratch.

She refused to allow her own inadequacies to increase her brother's burden.

Miyuki thumbed the CAD's power switch.

She knew without looking that the calculation device was currently absorbing her body's psions.

Even so, the amount was small enough that she had to pay extra attention to detect it.

It was only at a slightly elevated level compared to the normal loss of excess psions.

By the time she realized this, the Activation Sequence had already been stored into the Magic Calculation Area.

Though she was forewarned by Tatsuya's instructions, the tiny scale of the Activation Sequence still caught her by surprise.

With Miyuki's technical ability, she was able to execute dozens of copies of the same Activation Sequence with ease.

Even if the scale was tiny, every critical detail was recorded within.

Miyuki felt that this was an Activation Sequence completely stripped of anything unnecessary to boost efficiency to the max.

The variables were inputted into the Activation Sequence, beginning Magic Sequence construction.

Generally, Magicians wouldn't pay attention to these phases.

Magicians would typically use language formulas or images to properly formulate the desired phenomenon change, and then dive into the subconsciousness.

The Magic Calculation Area's job was to transform the imagined reality into data for the Magic Sequence. The "variables" in the Activation Sequence refer to the portions that must be created from the Magician's imagination.

Magicians can feel the Activation Sequences that have been absorbed into their physical body, just as they are able to sense the Magic Sequence being constructed within them. However, the construction process for Magic Sequences is partially involuntary and is not subject to conscious interference.

If this wasn't the case, based on human limits of understanding and comprehension of data, there would be no way to create Information Bodies capable of influencing reality.

Miyuki imaged herself floating to the ceiling's height.

All of a sudden, the bounds of gravity disappeared.

Her five senses lost touch with her environment as if her body had phased out of reality, causing Miyuki to panic slightly.

That being said, Miyuki's soul was filled with a delight that far exceeded that paltry sense of panic.

She never knew flying was such a liberating experience.

She was almost envious of the astronauts that strode across the stars with 80% of this feeling.

She also pitied them for having to wear cumbersome space suits in order to enjoy such pleasure.

Miyuki earnestly wished to leave this narrow basement and freely soar through the skies.

"How is it? Is the Loop System too stressful?"

Her brother's voice quickly pulled Miyuki's mind back to earth.

Miyuki was terribly embarrassed that she was engrossed in the pleasure of flight during such a critical experiment.

Even so, this wasn't the time for self-loathing.

Miyuki, you have to step up — Miyuki mentally scolded herself before answering her brother's question.

"No problems whatsoever. There are no headaches or sense of exhaustion."

"Excellent. Next is gradual parallel motion, get used to slowly accelerating yourself, then fly as you please."

"Understood."

Miyuki followed her brother's instructions and imagined herself slowly floating parallel to the ground.

The tiny Activation Sequence automatically spread out and copied itself, constructing the Magic Sequence that changed the direction of gravity to parallel motion.

The design behind Flying-Type Magic revolved around using the Loop System to continuously invoke magic.

According to this process, as long as new conceptual ideas are not introduced into the Calculation Area, the variables would continuously mirror the original values.

With the Activation Sequence added into the self-replicating Non-Systematic Magic data near the final stages of the Magic Sequence construction process and allowing the Activation Sequence to be applied to the Magic Calculation Area, even if the CAD is not being operated, the same Magic Sequence can still be invoked — using the Loop System, that is. Thus, the same Activation Sequence, construction of the Magic Sequence, and the data variables can be endlessly plugged in. This is the truth behind Flying-Type Magic.

Taurus Silver's magnum opus — "Loop System", was the perfect complement to the Flight Calculation Device that Tatsuya invented.

"Is the magic disjointed?"

"Not at all. As expected of Onii-sama, the timing is simply perfect."

The key to this system lies in recording the exact times the magic activates.

Humans are unsuited for such precise number management, so machines were absolutely necessary to fill this gap.

If the design stubbornly refused to take anything besides magic into account, then the system would be simply impossible.

Miyuki continued to follow Tatsuya's directions and incrementally raised the spiraling speed.

She used the limited space within the basement to the maximum extent. She turned, maneuvered, and flipped as she danced in the air.

The softly floating skirt and long, silky hair followed the outstretched body to display absolutely beautiful curves.

At some point, Tatsuya forgot to objectively analyze the situation and simply stood there mesmerized at the wholly unexpected fairy dance.

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Four Leaves Technology (the literal translation is "Four Leaves Technology", but the official company records and brand name intentionally used only "Four Leaves") — often shortened to FLT, had a CAD development center situated in the boondocks, nearly two hours away from Tatsuya's house by public transit (it was only one and a half hours by electric bike, but they chose to use public transit because of the rain). Tatsuya had long since familiarized himself with this route and, precisely because he was overly familiar, the long and arduous ride only served to irritate him.

"Miyuki.....?"

"Yes, Onii-sama, what is it?"

"......Never mind, I apologize. It was nothing."

"Huh.....?"

Unlike the labs near the main corporate headquarters, whenever Tatsuya came to this lab, Miyuki usually tagged along as well, so she was probably just as familiar with this route. But despite the dismal weather, her outlook remained much like they were on a picnic, causing Tatsuya to inquire to the reason behind that.

The reason he cut himself short after starting to ask was because when Tatsuya thought about it, he felt that this was a rather odd question.

Of course, Miyuki was quite confused, but her sunny disposition quickly returned, to the point that she was almost humming in joy.

However, the two of them had already entered the research lab, so she didn't actually make any sounds.

This was the hub for all corporate related technical research, the veritable beating heart of FLT itself, with all the security that accompanied it. Not only were there cameras watching every angle, the number of deployed security personnel was also astounding.

Even so, no one halted Tatsuya and Miyuki.

They didn't even bother to check in at the counter before walking down the window-less corridors that led to the deepest part of the facility.

Finally, the two of them arrived at a room with one wall that was covered in windows from the ceiling to the floor.

On the other side of the windows, a deep chasm extended nearly half a floor beneath the earth that was large enough to house a hangar.

Across this open space was another room with the same observation area.

This was the CAD testing center.

Over a dozen engineers and researchers were bustling about the office debating or manipulating various measuring devices.

"Ah, young master!"

Even though everyone was buried in work, someone greeted Tatsuya the moment he stepped into the observation room.

Which was quite rare — this was probably the only place — since everyone's greeting was extended towards Tatsuya and not Miyuki.

The name "young master" was initially applied to Tatsuya because he was the son of one of the corporate higher ups with the ability to enter as he pleased, but was now the respected title directed towards their future leader.

Tatsuya was slightly embarrassed by this moniker and wished that they would stop referring to him as such, but he knew that everyone called him that out of genuine friendship, so he didn't force the issue.

"Sorry for the bother, where's Director Ushiyama?"

The respectful gazes directed towards her brother made Miyuki glow with pleasure, causing no end of people — there were very few males capable of resisting Miyuki's smile — to get distracted from their work. Tatsuya allowed Miyuki to accompany him as he interrogated the first researcher in the white lab coat who greeted him.

The voice that answered this question came from far behind the crowd.

"Looking for me, Master?"

A tall but hardly fragile-looking engineer wearing gray work clothes threaded through the crowd.

"Director, my apologies for visiting when you're so busy."

"Wait, Master, please don't say that."

Tatsuya's respectful greeting caused the engineer named Ushiyama to color and shake his head.

"It is your right to act casual, but these men are your subordinates, so there's no need to be overly humble like this."

"Not so, everyone here was recruited by our father, so they hardly answer to me....."

"What are you saying. You are the far famed 'Mr. Silver' himself and we are honored to serve beneath you."

Every engineer and researcher who heard Ushiyama's voice nodded in agreement.

This was Four Leaves Technology's CAD Development 3rd Division.

The development team that created what the world called the "Silver Series".

Currently, it is publicly acknowledged that the "Silver Series" is the defining work of FLT's technical abilities. Once seen as rebels and renegades, the surplus employees from the technical department that made up the 3rd Division now held considerable sway in FLT after the advent of the Silver Series.

Thus, the engineers and researchers here swore eternal loyalty to one of the core developers — Tatsuya, who was "half" of Taurus Silver.

"Seriously though, I think that you, 'Mr. Taurus', are the actual leader of this group, right? It's because you were always reluctant to accept the directorship that 3rd Division still doesn't have managers and group leaders."

"Please don't say that, I'm not capable of being 'Mr.' or 'Taurus', I'm just an ordinary engineer who does the grunt work so that your ingenious theories can be facilitated. I'm the one who cannot stand the fact that my name is placed alongside the original developer. I'm not that brazen. It's just that the young master is still an underage student, so your patent would be a difficult issue, hence why I had to throw my name into the ring."

".....Without Ushiyama-san's skills, the 'Loop System' would be impossible to realize. I am not nearly as capable in terms of hardware knowledge, performance, and creativity, so regardless of whether it's skills or theory, the only thing that matters is that we are able to complete a model capable of mass consumption, correct?"

"Ah~ Stop, just stop. There's no way I can beat the young master in a debate, so let's get down to business. You didn't just pop in to see us, did you?"

As Ushiyama scratched his head in surrender, Tatsuya relaxed his solemn expression and let out a deliberate smile.

"OK, Ushiyama-san, today's test subject is this."

Tatsuya intentionally kept his tone and motions casual as he pulled out a CAD shaped like a smart phone. Ushiyama stared at it for more than 10 seconds without blinking at all.

This was the T-7 model CAD that Ushiyama prepared for Tatsuya for a specific reason.

To upload software into the test model meant that.....

"Is that..... the Flight Calculation Device?"

Ushiyama's hands shook as he took the CAD from Tatsuya's hands.

"Yes, the testing hardware that I had Ushiyama-san make is already loaded with the Activation Sequence for Sustained Gravity-Control Type Magic. With this test model it was easy to access and manipulate the system, making it very easy to use."

"Then the test....."

"As usual, only Miyuki and I have tested it, but we don't rate as normal Magicians."

Everyone present, and it wasn't just one or two either, who overheard them sucked in a breath and tensely stared at Ushiyama's hands.

".....Akira, how many T-7 Models do we have in the lab?"

Finally, Ushiyama used a fairly calm tone to ask his subordinate.

Upon getting the answer "ten", his half closed eyes abruptly sprang open.

"Damn! Only ten? Why weren't they replaced!

What? Order them later, grab every model we currently have plugged into the maintenance machines and copy the system the young master wrote!

Hiroshi, summon all the testers! What? Someone is on break?

I don't give a damn!

Drag them here by the neck if you have to!

Everyone else, stop whatever you're doing and prepare for precise measurement!

Do you guys understand? This is Flying-Type Magic! This will change the history of magic itself!"

He was probably using the internal broadcast.

Not just in this room, even the testing room on the opposite side burst into action as even the researchers on break started working.

This indoor CAD testing facility rivals a large gym in terms of area and height. The communication line hung down from the ceiling and was attached to the back of the testing personnel.

The line also doubled as a lifeline if needed.

Floating-Type Magic has already become widespread and this facility had also tested that before, but Flying-Type Magic was on a whole different level than Floating-Type Magic, to the extent that their actual designs were fundamentally different. It was also different from leaping and slow-motion descent, a hitherto unknown magic.

The tester's face was pale with anxiety.

New magics were usually created from already familiar magics, but no one knows where danger may be lurking.

There have been precedents where Magicians lost their lives due to tiny bugs in the Activation Sequence.

If they were using a brand new and (until now) unprecedented magic, no amount of caution was enough.

The surface changed to a shock-absorbing material and, once the suspension test was cleared, the preparations were finally complete.

"Start the test."

After evacuating to the observation room — not just for the safety of the observers, but for the testers as well — Ushiyama gave the order to begin.

From below, it was impossible to see what kind of expression the tester wore as he put on his safety helmet.

However, the tester, who had amassed extensive experience as the primary tester before reaching age 30, visibly clenched his teeth.

Even so, he thumbed the CAD's power switch without any hesitation.

"Confirm lift off."

"According to the measurements, there is no reverse force putting pressure on the ground."

Before the naked eye could make any confirmation, the personnel at the various measuring devices were already reporting in.

"Errors in upward acceleration within acceptable parameters."

"CAD performance is stable."

The tester's body was gradually rising.

Now, they could clearly see that his feet had left the ground.

The line was sagging, proving that the tester was not hanging from the suspension device.

Inside the observation room, excluding the sounds of the machines processing data and reporting back, there wasn't even the sound of clothes rustling.

Everyone forgot to move as they stared at either the scene before their eyes or the values displayed on the measuring devices.

"Upward acceleration still dropping..... and zero, now maintaining rising velocity."

The tester gradually rose until he was level with the 3 meter high observation room.

"Upward acceleration entering negatives..... Upward velocity has reached zero, confirmed immobile."

Up until this moment, this was still within the boundaries of what Floating-Type Magic could accomplish.

"Testing parallel acceleration."

Someone..... More like everyone held their breath.

"Halt acceleration, begin 1 meter/second parallel movement."

Without waiting for the measurement reports, it was obvious to the naked eye that the tester was currently moving in the air.

"It's moving....."

"He can fly....."

The incredulous words only served to confirm that the sight before everyone's eyes was reality.

"This is Tester #1 to observation deck, I'm currently walking in the air..... Belay that..... I'm flying, I'm free....."

The surprising transmission from the speakers released the emotions suspended by everyone's amazement.

"Awesome!"

"We did it!"

"Congratulations, young master!"

The observers shouted in joy.

The tester was freely tracing flight paths in the sky.

Only Tatsuya remained immune to the fiery emotions of the people around him as he calmly observed the expressions around him and accepted their delirious well wishes.

"Are you all morons.....?"

Ushiyama gestured helplessly at the testers that sprawled on the ground due to magic overuse.

This test ran massively over schedule and continued until all 9 testers were down and out for the count.

It wasn't that there was a problem with the process, it was because the testers didn't want to stop.

At their request, the communications line that also served as a life line was swapped for wireless communications so they could go completely off script and play hide and seek.

"How can you use Sustained-Type Magic for so long!"

Modern magic is almost always activated in an instant or over a short period of time.

Generally, magics with sustained effects are only valid within a specific time, so there are very few Magicians who can use magics that require constant activation. For example, "Sonic Blade" belongs to the Sustained-Type Magic category, but in reality, most users refresh the activation after each strike.

Until recently, magic that requires repetitive activation was seen as unique abilities for select Magicians and it wasn't until the introduction of the "Loop Cast" system that the automatic replication of Activation Sequences in the Magic Calculation Area became available to the general public.

"You are responsible for your own actions, I'm not handing out worker's comp."

Thankfully, no tester exhibited symptoms of magic deprivation.

Since this remained within the boundaries of hilarity, Ushiyama snorted at the protests and walked towards Tatsuya, who was staring intently at the test results.

"Is there any area you're concerned about?"

When Tatsuya turned around, his expression was a far cry from satisfied.

"Honestly, the areas for improvement are limitless..... But based on the current status, the stress for continuously executing Activation Sequences is still overly high."

For some reason, a knowing expression crossed Ushiyama's face as he heard this, and he glanced at Tatsuya and Miyuki, who was standing behind her brother.

"Of course, when compared to Hime-sama or the young master, these Magicians have a fairly limited psion count."

By Magic Power standards, Tatsuya was on the tail end of Magicians.

However, Magic Power standards fluctuate with the advancement of magic and the passage of time.

For example, thirty years ago Activation Sequences weren't as well understood as they are today, so the transition from Activation Sequences to the construction of Magic Sequences was so slow that it cannot be compared to today. Magic Sequence efficiency was also pretty low and, when compared to the current day and age, it required several times more psions to construct an equally effective Magic Sequence.

At that time, the standards for power of Magicians emphasized the psion count within the Magician's body (which included both the physical body and the mental "body") rather than focusing on the speed of Magic Sequence construction. By the old standards, both Tatsuya and Miyuki's psion count would rate as top tier.

Thanks to the improvements in Activation Sequences, Magic Sequences and CADs, a limited psion count wouldn't cause the same problems with magic invocation. Excluding "Non-Systematic Magic" techniques that directly released psions, a high psion count is only seen as a beautiful decoration now.

That being said, the use of Activation Sequence and construction of Magic Sequences still consumes psions and, even if each consumption is a small amount, hundreds or thousands of incremental amounts still add up to considerable stress on the Magician.

"We have to streamline the design for the CAD's automatic psion absorption to make it more efficient....."

"......Let me handle that. If we rely more on the hardware portion than software, that should lessen the load somewhat. We could probably set the timing mechanism as a feedback loop as well."

Ushiyama said this after a moment's consideration, which Tatsuya responded to with a knowing smile.

"I was just about to discuss that with you."

"I'm honored."

Both of them revealed the exact same smile.

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While there were a few hardware modifications still remaining, all in all the technical portion yielded a satisfactory result. Today's most important gain was the verification that the average Magician is able to execute Flying-Type Magic with a CAD obtainable on the general market.

There was no time to waste. After organizing the results of this experiment, next week he would publicize the details regarding Flying-Type Magic under the name Taurus Silver. Speed was more important than quality here, because the impacts of "first in the world" and "second in the world" were completely different. "First" was also an incredibly powerful tool for dissemination.

On the other hand, the CADs specifically designed for Flying-Type Magic would have to be objectively redesigned from scratch, so they would probably hit the market around September (the end of the first half of the fiscal year).

With these two objectives established, the meeting adjourned.

Tatsuya headed to the rest area to collect the waiting Miyuki and began the long trek home.

Despite all the work that needed to be done..... more like he adamantly insisted on sending them off, Ushiyama scratched his head in an awkward manner.

"I'm terribly sorry, I did contact the Vice President, but....."

Regardless of whether it was during the experiment or after the confirmation of success, the VP in charge of all FLT R&D divisions — Tatsuya and Miyuki's father never showed up at all, a detail that Ushiyama couldn't get over.

"Don't worry about it. It's our day off anyways, and even if he's at work, he should be at corporate headquarters."

Honestly, from Tatsuya's point of view, not seeing him was probably for the best.

As a matter of fact, Miyuki didn't want to see him at all.

However, that was probably too much information for Ushiyama. Ushiyama knew that the siblings' father not only held an important position in FLT, but was also the majority shareholder. Even if Ushiyama was a key

developmental engineer, the skeletons in the manager's closet should be kept far away from employees.

With this in mind, Tatsuya used this excuse as a response, but that only served to deepen Ushiyama's guilty expression.

"......No, the VP is actually here today....."

Even though Tatsuya's back was facing Miyuki, he could still feel his sister's emotional turbulence as she frowned.

Tatsuya himself actually let out a breath.

Thank goodness they didn't run into their father.

"As the VP, he probably doesn't have the time to check every site personally. I hardly think that he looks down upon R&D."

"No, that I understand. Also, the VP allocated a larger budget to us anyways."

Tatsuya intentionally steered the conversation back on its head and turned around to comfort Ushiyama. It was a shame that he had to treat the even more nervous Ushiyama like this, but Tatsuya also didn't want dwell on this subject.

As usual, fate had other ideas.

After the siblings said their goodbyes to Ushiyama and left the research labs, they encountered the people they least wanted to meet at the corridor leading to the threshold of the main area.

"Long time no see, Miyuki Ojou-sama."

As the three family members silently stared at one another, the first to speak was actually the fourth person present. This man was known to Tatsuya and Miyuki, but the emphasis was on "known" and not "close".

"It's been awhile, Aoki-san. I would like to say long time no see as well, but I'm not the only person present.

Otou-sama, you look well, thank you for your phone call last time, but I think that occasionally greeting your own son isn't grounds for divine retribution, is it?"

The smooth and lovable voice was tinged with barbs, but her opponent's skin and defenses were proof against the rose's thorns.

"Ojou-sama, forgive this one's impertinence, but this Aoki serves as the butler and financial manager for the Yotsuba Family. Your request for me to greet a paltry attendant is against our house rules."

"He is my Onii-sama."

Miyuki was striving to maintain her calm tone, but Tatsuya was very clear that she was reaching her breaking point.

"Again, forgive this one's impertinence, everyone in the house earnestly wishes for Ojou-sama to inherit the Yotsuba Family. He's only Ojou-sama's guardian, and thus stands on an entirely different level than your own."

"Hold, Aoki-san, I understand that interjecting here is considered boorish, but choose your words carefully."

Just as Miyuki was about to breakdown and scream, Tatsuya coldly overrode his sister's words.

His voice was chilling to the extreme.

Even such contempt found no purchase on Tatsuya's will.

Tatsuya's heart was "forged" this way.

Rather than affronted, Tatsuya was more concerned that Miyuki would hurt herself being enraged on his behalf.

"It doesn't matter. Although you are a mere attendant, you are still Miya-sama's son, so I am forced to overlook this breach of decorum."

So Tatsuya had no time to deal with his opponent's haughty attitude.

"Earlier, you claimed that all who serve the Yotsuba Family wish for Miyuki to be the next head of the Yotsuba Family. I do believe this is an unfair charge to the other candidates, correct?"

In order to avoid letting Miyuki be subjected to the negativity projected towards him any longer, Tatsuya must continuously press the attack, forcing the opponent to yield without allowing Miyuki to interject in any way.

"I believe our aunt has not selected a successor, unless you are telling me that you are privy to our aunt's decision?"

The shrewd and capable gentleman in the prime of his years that looked more like a lawyer than a butler was stunned into silence by the sixteen year old youth's inquiry.

"If her will is decided, then I need to begin preparations for Miyuki immediately. This is an excellent opportunity today, so I would be most indebted to you if you can verify this."

Tatsuya's voice was perfectly even, without a single rise or pitch in his volume.

"......Maya-sama has not made a decision."

Aoki answered with a suffering expression on his face.

Tatsuya intentionally widened his eyes to express his amazement.

"This is astounding! The fourth butler of the Yotsuba Family actually passed on his personal wishes in the guise of the family directive towards the candidates for succession? If so, who here is the one who violated the house rules?"

Tatsuya pretended to sigh as Aoki glared furiously at him, his face completely red. Tatsuya judged that Aoki's position was now untenable, so he prepared to depart with a victorious message.

Unfortunately, that judgment was too naive.

"......That was no assumption. As we all serve the Yotsuba Family, it is a common feeling that we all possess. Even though we cannot see heart to heart, as long as we aim for the same goal, then we are all on the same wavelength."

This was a fabricated excuse that abandoned all theory and logic. Even so, his opponent still prepared the forbidden poison for the last moment.

"You're nothing more than a heartless, false Magician. You wouldn't be able to understand."

The moment Aoki spat out this malicious sentiment, the walls were suddenly covered in frost.

The air conditioning kicked into overdrive trying to restore the rapidly falling temperature.

Swirls of cold air congregated around Miyuki's feet.

However, Tatsuya reached out with one finger on his left hand and, accompanied by the sound of a cassette player rewinding at high speed — a hallucination that only people that can sense magic can hear — the cold air vanished.

Miyuki's face alternated between angry red and green before turning completely pale. Tatsuya gathered his sister into his bosom with one hand before directing a chilling gaze that cut like a blade towards Aoki.

"My mother was the very one who created this 'heartless fake Magician', the older sister of the Yotsuba Family's current head Yotsuba Maya, she who was called Yotsuba and now Shiba Miya.

She used the forbidden Non-Systematic Magic 'Mental Design Interference', forcibly altering the area in the consciousness, most likely to create strong emotions called the limbic system by inputting a Magic Calculation Model, creating an artificial Magician. The one who designed this experiment was Yotsuba Maya, who had recently been appointed the head of the Yotsuba Family, while the one who conducted this experiment on her six year old son that had no magic skills was Shiba Miya.

In other words, to apply the word 'imposter' to me as the target of the experiment is to call the magic experiment conducted by the current head of the Yotsuba Family and her older sister as a fake. I'm sure you are aware of the consequences?"

Tatsuya gently held his beloved little sister who was sobbing into his chest. On the other hand, he continued to mercilessly press the attack on Aoki, who was responsible for driving his little sister into this state.

"....."

"Tatsuya, stop."

Tatsuya's father, who had remained silent until now — Shiba Tatsurou, covered for the immobile Aoki who had been cowed into silence and stepped forward to halt Tatsuya.

"Don't speak poorly of your mother."

But his words were completely off topic.

This was done to avoid irritating the main house and to protect himself.

This corporation was secretly funded by the Yotsuba Family, so even though he was the majority shareholder thanks to the stocks from his deceased wife, the actual power of attorney still remained in the hands of the Yotsuba Family, hence it wasn't surprising for him to speak softly around them, but.....

Tatsuya almost broke into laughter.

"Tatsuya, it's not that I don't understand why you bear hatred towards your mother....."

And, this father couldn't even read Tatsuya's expression.

Tatsuya truly believed that, for the sake of everyone's mutual mental health, it was best to leave as quickly as possible.

Even so, Tatsuya felt that he needed to add one extra comment before departing.

"Otou-san, you misunderstand, I don't hate my mother."

"Is..... Is that so....."

That was all that was necessary.

There was no need to tell him the words Tatsuya didn't say.

Tatsuya's heart did not possess the ability to "hate".

He could not feel any strong emotions like fury, despair, envy, hatred, disgust, gluttony, lust, sloth, and..... love.

Never would he forget himself in anger.

Neither would he wallow in despair.

Nor struggle with envy.

Unknown to hatred, nor known to disgust.

Or fall in love with women.

To hunger, but not gluttonous.

To arouse, but not lustful.

To tire, but not slothful.

The unique magic that only his mother possessed in the entire world erased all the strongest emotions and urges from his heart.

He did not hate his mother.

Nor was he furious.

That was because he was "unable" to enrage and "unable" to hate.

The only "emotion" they left for him was intentionally left behind to bind him to the Yotsuba Family with a chain forged of duty.

Of course, this was not filial piety.

And so, Tatsuya cradled the sobbing Miyuki as they left the premises without a word of goodbye.

Chapter 3

One of the advantages of having a set classroom at school was that it fostered building interpersonal relationships.

Regional proximity and blood relations are both powerful impetus for developing bonds and, regardless of whether they are official or unofficial organizations, serve to differentiate and categorize groups within groups.

For the practical application of this sentiment.....

"Morning, Shiba. I heard about it already, nice going."

"Morning, Shiba-kun, great job."

"Good morning, Shiba-kun, I'm rooting for you."

"Hey, go for it, Shiba."

.....And so, even students who normally weren't very close to him were voluntarily bridging out towards him through greetings and words of encouragement.

As soon as Tatsuya entered the classroom on Monday, he received a string of support from his classmates.

The reason why they did this was natural: Tatsuya was selected as one of the representatives for the Nine Schools Competition.

"The grapevine is quite active."

"Yep. This was only decided last week and there hasn't even been an official announcement yet."

"Yeah, so where did they get the news?"

Leo, Mizuki, and Erika did not appear to be feigning ignorance, so they probably weren't the culprits.

However, it's not like those responsible were issued gag orders either.

At the time, only upperclassmen attended the meeting, so they likely heard the news from their club leaders.

"Speaking of which, didn't they make the announcement today?"

Erika tilted her head to one side and asked, at which Tatsuya nodded in a solemn manner.

Including the technician team, the official roster for the Nine Schools Competition was finalized last Friday.

The original timetable called for the roster to be finalized two weeks ago, so they were obviously several steps behind.

The fact that the contestants were already decided may have been a blessing in disguise, since all the competition-use CADs and uniforms that usually took the longest time to prepare had already been assembled. The only bottleneck was that because the engineering candidates hadn't been settled, all of the maintenance and testing work was yet to be done.

Miyuki was a contestant herself, but owing to the constant stream of preparation work she was entirely unavailable. For her, Tatsuya was willing to sacrifice anything, but still couldn't dispel the notion that he was being railroaded.

"I think 5th period will be changed to an assembly, right?"

Mizuki said this as she gazed at the terminal screen set into the table before them that listed today's class schedule.

All grades shared the same schedule with three periods in the morning and two in the afternoon.

Even so, besides labs, technical skills, and physical education classes, standardized classes (classes set as progression goals) advanced according to the student's own pace. Modern schools allowed for personalized education to be displayed on the terminal screens in class and did not heavily restrict start and end times.

In modern schools, the higher the grade level, the less emphasis was placed on determining class time and break time. The fact that the school changed the entire 5th period into an assembly to properly send off the representatives was a clear sign of how highly the school viewed this event.

"Tatsuya-kun will also be onstage during the ceremony, correct?"

"Hm, yeah....."

Tatsuya stammered out a reply to Mizuki's question because this was precisely the point of contention that plagued him.

"And Tatsuya is the only First Year student, right?"

Just as Leo said, the only First Year student accepted into the technician team was Tatsuya.

Experience in CAD maintenance was absolutely necessary, so naturally upperclassmen should be the ones selected for the technician team, except that Tatsuya's skills were vastly different from the masses.

Of course, when taking into consideration that he was a pioneering expert in the development of CAD software, he would definitely be overqualified for serving as an engineer in a high school competition.

But, regardless of whether they were in his year or higher grades, no one was aware of this detail.

Only his sister Miyuki knew.

"Those Course 1 students look so~ very~ aggrieved."

The Course 1 students were still smarting from the results of the finals and this selection would only serve to throw more oil on the fire. This was blatantly obvious even without Erika verbalizing it.

"But all the contestants are Course 1 students....."

That was Tatsuya's perspective.

Since all the contestants for the Newcomers Division were Course 1 students and Tatsuya was only an auxiliary member, no one on the outside would comment on this.

—But for the people in question, this was insufficient to comfort the other Course 1 students that aimed to become Magic Artificers.

Tatsuya was rarely in a position that aroused jealousy.

He also lacked the ability to envy others.

His life experiences were not rich enough for him to observe all the minute details.

"There's nothing they can do about it. Jealousy alone isn't a good enough reason."

So when he heard Mizuki's piercing comment, Tatsuya was unable to formulate a reply.

"Relax, this time no one is going to throw stones or magic at you."

At Erika's overly extreme method of comforting him, Tatsuya could only smile wryly.

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After 4th period, Tatsuya reported on time to the backstage, where he was handed a thin jacket by Miyuki, who arrived before him.

"This is?"

For all intents and purposes, this was a normal jacket, but Tatsuya still wanted to verify that.

"This is the uniform for the technician team. Please put that on during the ceremony in place of the actual uniform."

The one who answered was Mayumi.

—With the expected answer.

Mayumi herself was wearing a western-styled sports jacket.

That was probably the uniform for contestants.

Miyuki, who was still in her school uniform, let out an expectant smile as she held out the jacket to Tatsuya with both hands.

A brief, mischievous urge flashed across his mind, but Tatsuya knew that resistance was futile.

Tatsuya frankly removed the jacket of his school uniform and hung it on the coat hanger prepared ahead of time.

Next, he slightly bent his knees and allowed Miyuki to help him put on the jacket.

Standing behind him, Miyuki tugged the jacket over her brother's shoulders before looping to the front and adjusting the collar and sleeves. Afterwards, she took a step back to glance over her brother's torso and letting out a wide, satisfied smile.

Tatsuya was largely aware of why his sister was in such a fantastic mood.

Her happiness was likely caused by the school emblem embroidered over the jacket's left breast.

The emblem was styled after a flower with eight petals.

Miyuki's uniform had the same emblem over the same location.

The emblem of First High.

And not a replacement either, but the symbol of a Course 1 student.

"Onii-sama, that suits you perfectly....."

The intramural competition uniforms were largely the same as the normal ones, which was natural since it was only intended to identify which school the contestants belonged to.

However, in Miyuki's eyes, Tatsuya's appearance was finally restored to its rightful state.

Tatsuya honestly couldn't care less but it was precisely because he didn't care that he didn't want to spoil the mood. There was still some time until the commencement of the ceremony, so Tatsuya waited around wearing the uniform for the technician team.

Miyuki was completely mesmerized by the dashing figure Tatsuya cut in his uniform. She remained standing there without tiring in her uniform. Tatsuya gazed around him but failed to catch sight of Miyuki's western sport jacket. Even with the copious amount of time remaining, Tatsuya still felt that she should get ready as soon as possible.

"Don't you need to change?"

"I'm serving as the ceremonial assistant."

Hearing Tatsuya's question, Miyuki snapped out of her mesmerized expression to reply with her usual smile on her face.

In other words, this was the only time that Miyuki was excluded from the participant standing and served instead as the representative for the send-off party..... At least that's how Tatsuya interpreted Miyuki's words.

"Is that so, that's quite a heavy responsibility."

"Please don't remind me....."

There was no way she would shrink at such a marginal duty, but she still employed that weak tone and faltering gaze, prompting Tatsuya to smile softly and lay a hand on his sister's head.

—The surrounding onlookers directed cold gazes towards the two of them.

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The team members responsible for organizing the so-called send off ceremony got the event started on time, and everything proceeded according to plan.

Even if Tatsuya stood onstage, there would be no stones or magic hurtled his way — that was a given.

However, for him, this was a very foreign location.

The participants and engineers assembled into two lines. Among the technician team, only Tatsuya was an underclassman. All the others were upperclassmen, which naturally lent the feeling that he was the odd man out.

Thanks to Tatsuya's performance during the selection meeting, he was spared the outright hostile or contemptuous gazes on stage.

That being said, it wasn't like the gazes were friendly. Favorable evaluation does not equate to a favorable impression.

Regardless of how they looked at it, his acceptance onto the team was an unprecedented elevation and special treatment.

To top it all off, Tatsuya was presently garbed in the jacket with the coveted eight petal flower emblem embroidered on it.

Surely someone must consider this offensive, which inevitably led to further backlash that he could do nothing about. Beneath the luminous lights, Tatsuya calmly thought about this as if he wasn't the principal.

During this time, they were introducing each contestant in turn on stage.

Mayumi was the master of ceremonies.

Upon being called, each participant would receive a special medal that concealed the ID crystal needed to enter the competition arena.

To improve the presentation, Miyuki was responsible for presenting the medal to each individual.

Just the contestants alone numbered 40 people (excluding Miyuki and Mayumi there were 38), so this was a very time-consuming process, but probably owing to her excellent upbringing, Miyuki maintained a sweet smile throughout as she smoothly pinned the medals onto each individual.

In such an extreme proximity that they could feel her breath, no male student was immune to Miyuki's smile as they desperately tried to fight their blushing and shaky expressions.

If that was the case, this scene would undoubtedly rouse the ire of the entire female student body, but even the female students that received the medals had succumbed to flushed faces or faltering gazes, so no one in the audience (especially the upperclassmen) was irked and instead smiled in agreement.

The medals were not just presented to the participants, but to the auxiliary team as well.

After the tactical advisory team was introduced, it was finally the technical support team's turn.

"Somehow I feel a little nervous."

Someone next to him suddenly spoke to him, causing Tatsuya to slightly turn his head.

The male student to his flank also turned his head slightly, catching Tatsuya's gaze directly.

The level of Tatsuya's sight was slightly higher.

If he recalled correctly, this was the Year 2 student named Isori Kei. Of course, he was a Course 1 student (and Tatsuya was the only Course 2 student onstage anyways).

"Yeah."

He was one of the very few that were openly friendly to Tatsuya.

This handsome youth possessed a mild temperament and, coupled with his slender figure, if he exchanged the pants for a dress, would perfectly fit the description of a "tall female student". However, he was also First Place in Magic Theory for the Year 2 class as well as one of the foremost Magicians with technical skills.

As Tatsuya re-examined his "beauty" at close range, he got the distinct impression that one shouldn't judge a book by its cover.

They were still on stage, so the conversation ended there.

However, even for a slower individual like Tatsuya, to be able to find one shining light of friendliness in this murky ocean of negativity was enough to lessen the gloomy emotions welling up in his heart.

As he felt his depression lighten, he had the excess energy to survey the audience.

Since there wasn't any assigned seating in the audience, the student body naturally split into two, with the Course 1 students in front and the Course 2 students in the rear.

That being said, a few outsiders had managed to infiltrate the front half.

They probably detected Tatsuya's gaze.

Erika vigorously waved at him from her seat in the third row from the front, which was close enough to be called front row seating.

Tatsuya was thoroughly astounded by this.

Taking a closer look, Mizuki sat next to Erika, with Leo on her other side and Mikihiko occupying Leo's other flank. Even the faces behind them were all familiar.

In sheer defiance of the disapproving looks sent their way by the surrounding Course 1 students, First Year Class E stormed the front of seating and claimed a section for themselves.

As Tatsuya was drawn to their courageous actions, Miyuki arrived in front of him with a small cart before her.

Of the 40 contestants, 4 tactical advisors, 8 technicians and removing the master of ceremonies and assistant, there were a total of 50 people on stage. Forty-nine of them had already received their medals.

Last, but not least, it was finally the 50th person's turn.

In other words, Tatsuya was up next.

Mayumi loudly proclaimed his name.

Was Tatsuya over thinking too much, or did she place extra emphasis on his name?

Tatsuya stepped forward to acknowledge the announcement.

Miyuki revealed a brilliant, melting smile — enough to cause Tatsuya to be worried about his sister's mental status — and stood before Tatsuya.

Miyuki clipped the medal onto Tatsuya's jacket.

At the same time, thunderous applause broke forth.

There was no need for any visual confirmation.

It was Erika and Leo leading the rest of his classmates in applause.

To Mayumi and Miyuki, who were responsible for directing the ceremony, this was an unplanned for ruckus.

However, just as the First Year Course 1 students were about to hush the clapping.....

Mayumi and Miyuki seized the initiative to start clapping from the wings of the stage.

After introducing the last representative, the entire assembly started applauding.

This perfectly coincided with the applause for the entire team, which spread throughout the auditorium.

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After the conclusion of the colors ceremony, the entire campus was completely focused on preparing for the Nine Schools Competition.

With the events they would be participating in settled, Miyuki spent every day practicing with Shizuku and Honoka until the last second before the campus closed.

Tatsuya needed to perform CAD maintenance at the same time he was assisting Miyuki with her tasks, so he was also occupied until late in the day.

Both Erika and Leo were affiliated with athletic clubs, so they were also drafted to help deal with the myriad tasks that needed doing.

Mizuki was the only one in the literary clubs, so this week she usually waited by herself for everyone else to finish.

Last week's colors ceremony filled her with anxiety.

Even though there was no assigned seating, it still took a lot of courage to disregard that unspoken rule.

There was no way she could do that alone, though the situation was more like if Erika hadn't been there, none of their classmates would've taken the plunge either.

Mizuki acknowledged her own introverted and cowering personality, so she was doubly impressed by and envious of her friend.

(But why was Erika striving so hard like that.....?)

Mizuki was forcibly dragged along by Erika into participating.

Of course, she wanted to support Tatsuya as well, but reflecting on the situation, she would be more than satisfied with applauding from the rear.

Erika was inclined towards reckless behavior, so her ulterior motive may also be to taunt the Course 1 students.

At the same time, Erika was a flighty individual that usually didn't think things through.

In Mizuki's eyes, she was someone who loved to get in on the action, but rarely was the source of any troublesome business. This could be easily explained if it only involved her best friends like Mizuki, but to be motivated enough to involve all of their classmates, this didn't seem to fit a practical joker's state of mind.

(So Erika is really like that towards Tatsuya..... Right.....?)

From Mizuki's perspective, the male who hit it off the best with Erika was Leo.

Erika also had an extensive back story with Mikihiko, who took Third Place in the Theoretical portion of their exams.

But Mizuki felt that Erika held something special for Tatsuya that weighed far differently than the others.

For some reason, Mizuki refused to assign this feeling Erika had a specific definition in her mind.

She arrived at the school entrance less than 5 minutes ago.

The time was too short for her to claim that she was tired of waiting.

However, this was more than enough time to jolt her thinking.

Without any conscious effort, an assortment of things flowed through Mizuki's mind.

This situation would perfectly fit the criteria for being distracted.

And so, with her sense unfocused towards any single point, she spread her senses outward and detected a foreign wavelength.

Mizuki pondered this for exactly one second.

Then she made up her mind to remove her glasses.

Instantly, a tidal wave of flowing colors came rushing in.

Her vision was filled with colorful lights from a myriad of shades.

Mizuki temporarily sustained the pain in her eyes brought on by the excess stimulation.

For her, the act of removing her glasses was like walking from pitch darkness into the sun's radiant rays.

The things she usually avoided looking at suddenly became visible.

The surplus data gave her a rudderless feeling as her ocular nerves and brain were overloaded by processing all this information.

If this happened to the average person, they might've been knocked unconscious by this information deluge, but for her, this was "another world" that had been by her side since birth.

Even people that were suddenly exposed before the powerful rays of the sun swiftly adapted after a short period of time.

For people with dark pupils suitable for intense light, this time would be even shorter.

All Mizuki had to do was blink two or three times and her eyes adjusted to be able to see a psion light several dozen times stronger than what the average Magician perceives as well as the pushion light that average Magicians couldn't even identify.

Mizuki cautiously replaced her glasses into the carrying case, then directed her gaze towards the odd vibration from earlier.

She swiftly found the frequency that allowed her to penetrate the anti-spirit light lens.

The pushion signal that possessed a wavering but regular beat like breathing.

Now, even the source of the light could be easily seen.

Mizuki advanced towards the Technical Skills Building where the vibration originated from as if drawn to it.

The closer she got to the Technical Skills Building, the more she felt the seeping cold air in the surrounding environment.

This was the middle of summer, and even if the setting sun was partially blocked by the neighboring hills and cut a horizon that was not altogether "curved", the temperature was still more than high enough to be sweating.

This was an illusion.

"Something" was pretending to be cold air, tucked within the folds of the warm summer air.

This "something" seemed to order Mizuki to turn back.

Like threatening her to desist her advance.

However, her feet did not come to a halt.

Logic demanded that she turn back, but Mizuki was a member of the magic community and destined to walk side by side with magic, so Mizuki's instincts instructed her to use her pair of "eyes" to ascertain what this something was.

There were very few people in the Technical Skills Building, so there were no sounds of friction or loud laughter.

The overhead lights on the ceiling maintained a degree of brightness that made for comfortable browsing of tiny letters.

Just as usual.

No, this was a school for magic instruction and this was the Technical Skills Building frequented by many individuals.

If an incident had occurred, it couldn't have gone unnoticed by the instructors and upperclassmen.

In comparison to ordinary high schools, magic high schools had no place for ghost stories or urban legends.

Since no alarm was triggered, that meant that the unusual situation that Mizuki detected was the product of magic.

Otherwise — the true spiritual manifestation that could not be detected by modern magic.

An ominous feeling wrapped around her heart and caused her back to quiver, but Mizuki pressed forward as if being herded in or dragged in without her control.

As Mizuki was led upstairs, she noticed a faint, pleasant smell lingering in the air.

She had encountered this fragrance during Magic Medicine class.

The fragrance was a combination of many incense woods that produced a sedative effect.

She pursed the pulse towards the medicine labs.

The irregular pushion lights seemed to be caused by a certain student's magical experiment.

After verifying that this wasn't a true spiritual manifestation, Mizuki let out a sigh of relief.

And so, the sense of curiosity that was lurking behind her wall of unease peeked its head out.

One of the fundamental lessons first taught in Magic Technical Skills class is that one must never intrude on another person's magic experiment site

without permission. Unannounced guests run the risk of accidentally triggering the magic area and may even cause the magic to spontaneously burst out of control. The school has repeatedly reminded them that it is extremely dangerous and foolish for Magicians-in-training — such as new students like them — to barge into magic experiments unannounced.

However, the current Mizuki had completely forgotten that warning.

Mizuki's misdirected sense of caution prompted her to surreptitiously sneak over and nudge a small crack in the door.

She meticulously avoided making any noise and peeked into the room's interior from the crack.

In that instant—

Mizuki was barely able to swallow her scream of terror.

No, rather than being one of terror, it was simply a scream of surprise.

Inside the medicine lab, there were many blue, sky blue, and dark blue orbs dancing through the air.

Each orb had an independent "strength" and "consciousness".

Mizuki knew through "visual confirmation" that all things in the natural order possessed differing strengths that did not tilt towards any particular direction, but maintained a constant state of flux. Mizuki was quite familiar with scenes of "strength"-based natural phenomena that congregated as floating orbs. In her "eyes", the myriad details of the world were similar to the pushion flow that the human consciousness released.

However, this was the first time Mizuki felt that the floating congregates possessed a "consciousness".

(Spirits.....?)

Is this what they call spirits — she thought.

Mizuki was deeply moved by this, enough to abandon all other thoughts.

And the person who summoned these spirits was—

"Yoshida-kun.....?"

Completely abandoning any caution whatsoever, Mizuki softly murmured.

This was an entirely subconscious action.

Even so, the one whose name was called was no pushover.

Especially because he was situated in a private location where no one would pass by and the fact that someone witnessed his secret "magic".

"Who's there!"

A completely reflexive inquiry.

His words were laced with the fury of being discovered, causing the "consciousness" in the "orbs" to react.

"Ah!"

As the orbs swarmed forward, Mizuki screamed and clenched her eyes shut.

Simultaneously, a "strong gust" approached from her flank, forcing her to duck down.

But this was a flow of psions that would neither disturb a hair nor rustle her dress.

The gust swept back the swarming orbs and protected Mizuki, but she had no way of knowing with her eyes closed.

Trembling with trepidation, Mizuki slowly opened her eyes to find Mikihiko hatefully glaring at Tatsuya, who calmly accepted this gaze without expression.

"......Mikihiko, relax, I don't want to throw down with you here."

At Tatsuya's sudden appearance, Mizuki could only stare with wide eyes from her kneeling position. Before her, Tatsuya had two empty hands raised before him.

This was universal for both Magicians and mundanes, a sign that the person in question did not wish to fight.

Mikihiko revealed a thoroughly astounded expression and his enmity vanished at the same moment, as if it had never appeared in the first place.

This quickly dispelled the tense atmosphere. Mizuki finally shed her frozen posture and rose with a crestfallen Mikihiko in front of her.

"......Tatsuya, my apologies, I didn't mean to do that."

Mikihiko looked like a lost child without a home.

All of a sudden, Mizuki felt the urge to "comfort him", but was anxious because she couldn't find the appropriate words.

Fortunately, they managed to avoid the awkward period of silence.

"I don't mind, so put your mind at ease. At the end of the day, it was Mizuki's fault for disrupting the caster's concentration during the magic invocation phase."

"Eh? Me?"

Mizuki hurriedly turned around only to find Tatsuya mischievously smirking at her and quickly realized that he wasn't really scolding her.

"No, it's not her fault."

However, Mikihiko didn't see it that way.

When he rejected Tatsuya's comment, he spoke in a fairly rapid manner.

This was probably because Tatsuya's comment hit too close to home, causing him to panic slightly.

"It is only because of my own inadequacy that I would become frantic at just being called by name..... Also, I'm sorry I forgot something very important. Thanks, Tatsuya. Thanks to you, I didn't accidentally hurt Shibata-san."

"She would be fine even if I didn't do anything. Just then, that was Spirit Magic right?"

Mikihiko nodded at Tatsuya's question, but hesitated for some reason.

"Based on the Buddhist spirits of heaven and earth, our family calls it 'Divine Earth Magic'."

Even so, Mikihiko stuck by his guns, probably because this was a non-negotiable point for Magicians.

Spirit Magic is a type of Ancient Magic which uses independent Information Bodies commonly called "spirits" to interact with other Information Bodies. Magic studies often refers to this magic as "Spirit Magic", but also shortens spirits to SB (Spiritual Being), but users generally refer to them as "spirits".

"I don't have the ability to identify spirits, but I do know that you're the one controlling the rite. On top of that, Mizuki actually managed to bypass the dispersal ward, so it would be fairly difficult for her not to surprise you."

"How did you know about the ward..... Oh right, Tatsuya also studied Ancient Magic, so you would know if a rite is effective or not..... Looks like you are truly out..... No, you've surpassed the limits of my knowledge."

"You can go ahead and say 'outrageous'."

Tatsuya spoke in a teasing manner, to which Mikihiko replied with a wry smile — the tense corners of his mouth relaxed.

"At any rate..... No matter how much you don't want other people to see you, I think that setting a ward within the school labs also qualifies as an outrageous action."

"True."

Their combined laughter completely erased the previously tense atmosphere.

"Just now, were you using summoning magic on natural spirits? This is the first time I've seen it."

"......Hiding anything at this point is fruitless. Tatsuya is correct, I was using water spirits to practice summoning magic."

Mikihiko gathered the burning incense wood from the table stove and answered Tatsuya.

Beside him, Mizuki was using a cleaning cloth to wipe away the ashes that stuck to the tabletop.

Of course, Mikihiko wanted to politely decline this gesture, but Mizuki's diligence proved particularly stubborn on this point.

"Water spirits..... Unfortunately, I only know that they are the congregations of pushions..... Mizuki, what did you see?"

"Eh? Ah, me too, the only thing I saw were blue-colored orbs."

Hearing Tatsuya's question, Mizuki made a vague smile and shook her hands in a wavy manner before her.

Because Mizuki was still holding the wet cleaning rag in her hand as she did this, a small portion of the murky water splashed onto Mikihiko's face, but she was wholly unaware because the question caught her completely off-guard.

As Mikihiko himself..... he also seemed unaware.

His eyes were wide open as his expression tensed.

"Colored.....? You can see differences in color.....?"

"That, uh..... Yes."

Mizuki didn't understand why Mikihiko wore (from Mizuki's perspective) a terrified expression, so she answered back in a quavering voice.

"For example..... blue, sky blue, or dark blue..... Ah!"

Mizuki didn't dare to look Mikihiko in the eye, so she didn't stare directly at him as she replied. However, she let out a small cry upon noticing the small droplets of water on Mikihiko's face.

"S-s-sorry! That..... Oh, right, handkerchief, handkerchief."

Mizuki scrambled to get her handkerchief from the school bag to wipe Mikihiko's face.

However, Mikihiko roughly grabbed her extended hand.

And dragged the terrified Mizuki right before him.

Mikihiko caught the off balance Mizuki and stared at her eyes from such a close proximity that it seemed like he was about to kiss her.

"Uh..... This....."

Mizuki was so confused and frantic that she was incoherent, but Mikihiko didn't seem to notice that.

Mikihiko just kept staring without batting an eyelid, while the panicking Mizuki didn't dare to turn around.

Without any warning, the two of them just continued to stare at one another.

"......If this was a consensual scene then I'd have to excuse myself, but otherwise that may be a slight problem."

"Wah!"

"Ah!"

The two of them froze like they had forgotten how to breathe, but, likely recovering upon hearing Tatsuya's innocuous voice, quickly sprang apart.

"......I apologize."

"Please..... Please don't say it like that..... I'm the one who should apologize."

Quite the conundrum.

It was fairly obvious why Mikihiko was asking for forgiveness — that was borderline sexual harassment, and he shouldn't complain even if he got slapped in the face — but why was Mizuki also apologizing?

Most likely out of panic. Tatsuya also felt that the atmosphere was putting him off as well.

"......Miyuki, Erika and Leo are already at the rendezvous, so if you feel like staying, we can head back first."

"Eh? Ah, Tatsuya-kun, so that's why you came looking for me..... Wait, ah!"

Mizuki seemed to take half a second to process what Tatsuya told her (more like she took half a second to do this from her perspective), let out a cry of shock, then lapsed back into silence. No, she likely had something she wanted to say, but her frozen mouth was incapable of uttering words. It appeared that her distress had caused a blockage in the speech area of her brain.

At any rate, this should only be a temporary setback — Tatsuya thought as he put this in the rear view mirror — alas, his expression was a far cry from his usual "poker face" — as he directed his view towards Mikihiko.

"So, Mikihiko, what was that all about?"

Tatsuya started to dissect Mikihiko's astounding action with considerable interest.

"Sorry, I was just so shocked....."

Mikihiko let out a small sigh of relief at the change in topic and quickly took this opportunity to respond to Tatsuya's query.

"Wait, there's no need to apologize to me. Why were you so surprised?"

"Well....."

Hearing Tatsuya's words, Mikihiko once more bowed towards Mizuki.

"I'm terribly sorry.

That was because I never thought someone could tell the difference in color between spirits.....

At the thought that you might possess crystal eyes, I simply couldn't sit still and lost control of myself.....

I know this just sounds like an excuse, but I definitely didn't plan anything nefarious.

I truly just wanted to verify that fact."

Mikihiko's earnest apology achieved the desired effect; Mizuki's frazzled state returned to normal.

Just as he said, this was only an excuse.

This was entirely on Mikihiko and his unrestrained curiosity and had nothing to do with Mizuki.

Even so, at Mikihiko's desperate explanation, Mizuki responded with both a warm and gentle gaze, signifying that she had already forgiven him.

"Yoshida-kun, it's alright, I was just surprised, that's all."

After saying this, Mizuki revealed a sweet and relaxing smile and quickly added, "But that would be terribly embarrassing, so please don't do that again."

His face completely flushed, Mikihiko nodded vigorously.

It looked like the earlier attempted sexual harassment had reached a peaceful conclusion and Tatsuya's satire never occurred, but Tatsuya didn't want to dwell on that too much.

"Speaking of which, Mikihiko, why are you surprised?"

Seeing the two of them return to normal, Tatsuya resumed the earlier questioning.

"Based on what you said, the ability to identify the colors of the spirits is extremely rare?"

Tatsuya possessed the ability to decipher psion information bodies, but did not view the information body as an image during his analysis, so he wasn't aware whether color identification was special or not. No, the ability to identify pushion information bodies was definitely rare, but Tatsuya could not comprehend why "color identification" had any special meaning.

At Tatsuya's question, Mizuki also looked at Mikihiko with the same look in her eyes. She probably had the same question as well.

"Also, what do you mean by crystal eyes? If convenient, can you explain that to us?"

Mizuki's eyes clearly showed that she wanted to know as well.

"......Yeah, it's not like the information is any sort of secret."

Mikihiko's brief delay before answering clearly hinted that what he was about to say wasn't so simple. Tatsuya detected that Mikihiko occasionally showed lapses of irresponsibility..... that bordered on self-destructive impulses.

"Spirits have colors, and we as Summoning Magicians rely on these colors to identify the different types of spirits."

That being said, Mikihiko seemed very sincere as he began to explain the nuances of Summoning and didn't give off an irresponsible feeling.

"Even so, it's not like we can actually see the spirit's color."

Mizuki was confounded.

Tatsuya also didn't follow, but he didn't immediately ask and merely used his eyes to signal Mikihiko to continue.

"In reality, spirits don't possess set colors at all. The colors that the Magician "sees" change depending on what system or style they belong to.

Take my style for example: water spirits are blue.

But in Europe, the local style claims that water spirits are purple.

On the mainland, the dominant opinion is that the color is a dark blue-ish hue that is almost black.

This wasn't because the vibrations of the spirits differed based on location and magic.

It was because the Magicians used different methods of identification, hence why they 'see' different colors."

"......In other words, they aren't identified by sight, but through magic recognition of the vibrations?"

"Correct.

In order to better identify the spirits, we use colors to categorize the oscillations.

You could say that we've embellished the spirits a little.

So, we each have a method of identifying spirit colors.

In my style, water spirits are blue, fire spirits are red, earth spirits are yellow, and wind spirits are green.

No difference in shade or brightness.

We all apply the same color in our minds, so there's no discrepancy in hue.

So all water spirits are strictly blue.

According to this identification system, it's impossible to see sky blue or dark blue water spirits."

"......But Mizuki saw them."

"She probably felt the discrepancy in hue due to the strength and nature of the water spirits and 'truly' saw the spirits color.

My style refers to those types of eyes as 'crystal eyes'.

This term is likely used by other styles under different circumstances, but for our style, they refer to the eyes that can see 'god'.

Rumors say that those who can see the colors of the spirits are also able to see where spirits spring forth and congregate, as well as the 'divine spirits' of the natural order and the key to accessing those systems.

To us, the people with crystal eyes are mikos that can connect to the divine spirit systems."

"In other words, Mizuki is exactly the person you guys are looking for?"

"Yes..... But there's no need to worry. Currently, I don't have the power to stand against 'god'. If it was the me from a year ago, I might have arrogantly claimed her for myself, the current me possesses neither the desire nor the mettle to try. That being said, I also won't reveal to other Magicians that she's such a critical individual for divine magics. Even if it's my own brother, I could never bear to simply watch as others ascended to the heights of Divine Earth Magic. I won't tell anyone about Shibata-san's crystal eyes."

Mikihiko's gaze was unyielding.

Flecks of madness danced just below the surface.

Tatsuya read that as a metamorphosis of his original possessiveness.

This wasn't "claimed for himself", but "refusal to allow anyone else to do so".

Mikihiko was staring at Mizuki with those kinds of eyes.

"......That's true, I will also keep this a secret."

Based solely on the fact that neither "wished for their friend to be used", Tatsuya and Mikihiko could agree.

So he signaled his agreement by nodding his head.

Signaled to Mikihiko.

And to Mizuki as well.

Mizuki wore an open expression of astonishment at Tatsuya's motion and quickly responded with a placating smile without comprehending the reason behind it.

Chapter 4

August 1st.

The departure date for the Nine Schools Competition finally arrived.

Otaru's Eighth High and Kumamoto's Ninth High would leave earlier due to their respective locations, whereas First High, conveniently located on the eastern outskirts of Tokyo, usually departed for the competition dormitories the day before the contest begins.

Rather than attaching any strategic importance to this, it was mainly because the remote schools had priority access to the training facilities.

The official competition arena was restricted until the day of the competition, so there was no real reason to arrive earlier—

"That's how it is."

"Is that so..... At any rate, thank you for your simple explanation."

Tatsuya wanted to ask Mari, in a tone laden with sarcasm, if there was any reason she was telling him all this, but he patiently waited for her to finish her explanation and quickly shook his head to dispel this ridiculous impulse that wouldn't serve anyone.

The two of them were speaking beneath the blazing sun reigning in the middle of the blue summer sky. Exactly why were they making themselves more heated on this hot and humid day? Even if you asked him, Tatsuya had no answer for that one.

This was not in his interest.

"Sorry~!"

This exclamation was accompanied by the music of sandals lightly tapping on the pavement. Looking towards the sound's source, Mari let out a sigh and smiled beneath her parasol while Tatsuya, completely heedless of the sun beating down on him, wordlessly checked off the last member of the roster on his terminal device.

—One and a half hours late, everyone was finally here.

"Mayumi, you're so slow."

"Sorry, sorry."

Both the reprimand and the apology were just as concise.

The two of them proceeded to embark onto the bus as if nothing had occurred.

At least, until Mayumi came off the bus empty-handed.

"......Did you forget something?"

Tatsuya asked, slightly concerned that his poker face was slipping.

Spare change of clothes, cosmetics and other living supplies — Miyuki was obviously the one who taught him that cosmetics were a must-have for overnight stays — have already been bundled into the storage compartment, and the checklists mailed from each of the contestants' families have already been matched with the luggage, so nothing was missing.

Even if something was left behind, the dormitories had plenty of spares. This was at most a two hour bus trip, so there shouldn't be a need for much luggage.

"No, it's not that..... Tatsuya-kun, I apologize that you had to wait so long for me."

"Please don't concern yourself with that. I'm well aware of your situation."

Mayumi wasn't tardy because of some preposterous reason like oversleeping or getting the time wrong.

Three hours ago, she suddenly sent word that she would be late due to family business.

In her message, Mayumi asked for everyone to depart without her and that she would meet them at the destination later. Still, the 3rd Year students unanimously agreed to wait for her, so they asked Mayumi to get here as soon as she could.

This wasn't because she was next in line for the Saegusa Family.

She had two older brothers.

Even if she was a direct descendant from the Ten Master Clans, Mayumi was the little sister who was still in high school, so there were very few cases where she was responsible for handling family business. That being said, the very fact that the family recalled her the day of the school's official event clearly hinted that this was extremely important.

From Mayumi's perspective, if the other students set off on time, she could get there at a more leisurely pace rather than hurrying along. However, since everyone — Tatsuya actually disagreed in private — was set on waiting for her, Mayumi was forced to pick up the pace.

Thus, Tatsuya was not going to call her out for being one or two hours late.

"Isn't it too hot?"

"It's still in the morning, so it's OK, and this temperature isn't bad at all."

Tatsuya was the only 1st Year student in the auxiliaries, so he was responsible for roll call.

There were 40 contestants, 4 strategic advisors, and 8 technicians.

Of the 12 people that were not contestants, only Tatsuya was a 1st Year student.

Of course, there were other auxiliary members besides these 12 people. Not counting the strategy and technician team, there were also 20 volunteers that performed all the busywork, but they already departed for the premises, so there wasn't even a faculty member present. Only the drivers and the official participants were taking the bus and four cargo vehicles.

"But you're sweating like a horse..... Wait, what? You're not really sweating that much."

"No, I have at least enough magic to ward off the sweat..... but I'm not gross enough to not sweat at all during the summer."

He was using magic to purify the sweat and releasing it through the skin and clothes.

Tatsuya's intrinsic magic "Dissolution", in terms of categorization belongs to a derivative of Separation Magic. It was a combination of "Gather",

"Disperse", "Absorb", and "Release", but to be honest, "Release" probably made up the highest percentage.

Thus, he was more adept at Release Systematic Magic.

"You actually used the word gross....."

The word wasn't particularly odd, but Mayumi smiled brilliantly, as if encountering something especially comical.

Must be the season.

At this moment, Tatsuya thought her smile was as radiant as the sun.

This must have been a hallucination brought on by the sun, the temperature, and the humidity.

.....The best evidence came from the way Mayumi's smile instantaneously switched to her usual teasing smile.

"By the way, Tatsuya-kun, what do you think of this?"

The "this" that she spoke of..... must be the same one Tatsuya had on his mind.

Mayumi was referring to the summer dress that she wore.

She used both hands to hold the large-brimmed hat and posed, making it very hard to misunderstand.

They were only checking in to the dorms today and there were no official activities.

Probably because of this, even if it's a school activity, there was no obligation to wear school uniforms.

The 1st Year students including Tatsuya were all garbed in their uniforms, but less than half the 2nd Year students were in uniform, while almost all the 3rd Year students were in casual clothes.

With that in mind, taking into account how modern decorum frowned upon skin that was not covered in clothing, the majority of the students were dressed like Mari in long sleeved tunics and pants that were easy to move in.

One notable exception was a 2nd Year female student named Chiyoda. She was wearing shorts and long socks that extended to her thighs; it was hard to tell if it was a wardrobe suitable for summer. As for Isori, Chiyoda seemed to have forced him to wear pants that only extended to mid shin with longer socks as well, just as if they were a couple (which, in fact, they were).

Among this group, Mayumi's appearance was very conspicuous.

As a matter of fact, she was "extremely conspicuous".

Both her arms and shoulders were revealed in her summer dress.

The length was also above her knees.

Her bare legs were matched with a pair of high heeled sandals.

Her skin was lightly browned, probably because she applied an anti-UV and infrared protection layer. Taking this into account, she technically wasn't revealing anything, but this skin coloring only served to help people think that she had been sunbathing.

"It suits senpai very well."

A daring summer outfit embroidered with flowers truly suited Mayumi perfectly.

"Is that so.....? Thank you."

The surprised tone coupled with a bashful expression was also a killer combination.

".....If only you were slightly embarrassed while complimenting me, then that would be perfect."

The young lady who was 2 years older than Tatsuya extended both arms straight onto her hips and leaned forward to look upwards at him.

Though petite, she still possessed average measurements around the bosom and, once squeezed by both arms, a lovely cleavage could be seen.

At this point, it almost seemed intentional.

".....Looks like a lot of hard work."

"......Ah?"

Presently, Tatsuya had no way of knowing what pressing business had detained Mayumi, but she most likely accrued considerable stress.

"President, it's time to go. Please catch some shut-eye during the ride."

—Tatsuya chose to explain himself this way.

"Wait, uh..... Tatsuya-kun? Have you misunderstood something?"

Tatsuya's attitude suddenly switched to a comforting one and, combined with his compassionate gaze, threw Mayumi for a loop.

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"......Seriously, Tatsuya-kun actually thought I'm bipolar. How rude."

In the moving bus, Mayumi angrily puffed out her cheeks, while Suzune, who was sitting beside her in the aisle seat, watched her warmly.

"I obviously wanted him to sit next to me, but he fled to another car."

Speaking of which, as a technician team member, Tatsuya was supposed to sit in the storage vehicles, so from an objective point of view — or maybe from a superficial perspective, he wasn't avoiding Mayumi.

"Who does he think I am....."

"That was the correct decision."

"Eh, Rin-chan, what did you just say?"

Mayumi continued her lively complaints, to which Suzune calmly retorted back.

Mayumi was wearing a sweet smile, but her eyes were not smiling. Even though she was wearing such a terrifying smile and superficially — and only superficially — asked in a cheerful tone, this didn't impact Suzune's calm expression in the slightest.

"I said he made the correct decision, otherwise he might suffer at the President's hands."

"Wait a minute, that's too much! Aren't you taking this a little too far?"

Suzune's utterly serious assessment caused cracks to appear in Mayumi's steady facade.

"There are very few male students that can resist the President's beauty, and that beauty has a powerful magic of its own."

"......That....."

"....."

Likely because Suzune's expression was overly serious as she said this, Mayumi wasn't certain if she was being honest or simply poking fun at her — however, for someone who aimed to be a Magician to say "beauty has magic", this was most likely a joke at her expense.

"Still, I hear that Shiba-kun excels at nullifying other people's magic, so the President's magical appearance cannot entrance him."

Even if she only heard the sound, Mayumi knew for some reason that Suzune said "magical appearance" and not "magic eyes". [1]

"......Rin-chan!"

Mayumi finally realized that she was being teased.

"OK, OK, President, please relax."

"You don't have the right to tell me that!"

Her good friend maintained her perfectly serious demeanor despite Mayumi edging closer with an outraged expression on her face, so the only thing she could do was turn her back to Suzune and throw a small tantrum by herself in the corner.

Seeing her body hunched together from the side at a certain angle would lead to—

"Uh..... President, are you feeling unwell.....?"

—This.

The voice from across the aisle where Suzune sat was both worried and nervous.

"Ah? No, it's not that....."

For Mayumi, this was an unexpected misunderstanding.

As she was hesitating, Hattori, who had specifically come over to check up on her, misinterpreted the situation even further, or rather, her reaction simply reinforced his preconception.

"Shiba mentioned earlier that the President looked tired. Looks like he wasn't far off the mark. If that guy knew where the boundaries were..... No, this isn't the time for that subject."

"Uh, Hanzou-kun. I just said, I'm not feeling sick....."

"I know the President doesn't want us to worry and I understand that I should respect that, but forcing yourself beyond your limits wouldn't do us any favors."

Hattori was completely serious — he was earnestly concerned about Mayumi's physical condition as he watched her.

The reason he was blushing was likely because of Mayumi's slightly outrageous sitting posture, where her thighs were slightly visible around the edges of the summer dress. However, both her legs were neatly placed together.

"Vice President Hattori, where are you looking?"

For the record, Hattori was completely focused on Mayumi's face.

He did not look anywhere else, but at the same time, this meant — he was desperately trying to not look anywhere else.

He originally came over out of concern for Mayumi, but he hurriedly averted his gaze — likely out of guilt that he did look in that direction, causing Hattori to look incredibly out of sorts.

.....Given that this alone was enough for him to be guilty and wavering to this degree, only served to prove that he was an honest and innocent teenager.

"Ichihara-senpai! I didn't look there..... No, uh, I just wanted to offer the President a blanket....."

Unfortunately, his innocent teenager image only served to be the perfect prey for his senpais.

"Vice President Hattori wanted to bring the President a blanket? Then by all means, go ahead."

Suzune revealed an understanding expression as she rose and used her eyes to signal Hattori to hurry up.

As for Mayumi, she pitched in by pretending to avert her eyes out of embarrassment and used both her hands to cover her slightly exposed chest.

With a spread blanket in both hands, Hattori was rendered completely immobile.

A definite trace of mischief could be seen in Mayumi's eyes.

Looks like Mayumi has become even harder to control than ever.

.....Shiba-kun made the right decision — Suzune thought to herself.

He washed his hands of the whole deal.

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"What the heck are those guys doing.....?"

Hattori was frozen in place, Mayumi was watching with expectation dancing in her eyes, and Suzune was calmly watching from the sidelines. This awkward three-way caused Mari to sigh and comment in a helpless tone.

As usual, Hattori was dancing to Mayumi's tune. After verifying this, Mari sat back down after rising from her seat (as a matter of fact, her seat was facing Suzune and company's position from across the aisle).

Mari didn't say this aloud, but she too was concerned on Mayumi's behalf, but her inability to do anything was more pronounced.

"Eh..... Just like old times....."

Mari secretly suspected that Hattori was under a lot of stress due to Mayumi's constant teasing, which in turn brought about his harsh attitude towards Course 2 students, and that led to Mayumi's headaches regarding her Vice President's actions and created a vicious cycle. This was something that did not sit well with her.

That being said, Mari also knew that Mayumi's stress level was far heavier than hers.

Mari's family boasted considerable history — rumor said that they were descended from General Watanabe Tsuna from the peaceful eras, although no one knew if this was true — but based on the current standings, they were barely on the fringes of the "Hundred Families".

Mari didn't know if it was because of a mutation, if her genes skipped a generation or she simply didn't inherit the bloodline, but at any rate she was the only one in her family with vaunted magic talent. Thus, even though her family had great hopes for her, Mari didn't have to concern herself with the family rivalries that were abundant in magical society.

On the other hand, the Saegusa and Yotsuba Families currently dominated the upper echelons of the Ten Master Clans and while Mayumi wasn't the next head, she was still a direct descendant and the eldest girl, so even though she was still a high school student, there had been quite a few marriage proposals even before she reached high school (which were not rumors, but grounded in fact).

As for Mayumi herself, even compared with the other Magicians within the Ten Master Clans, she still possessed "outstanding" magical talent. She was the subject of intense scrutiny, the veritable rising star of tomorrow among pure bloods.

On top of that, she was also the Student Council President, which only added to the things on her plate.

No matter how resilient her personality was, her days were by no means a walk in the park.

She's only playing a little bit, Mari thought, so leniency is probably the best approach.

While she was considering this, Mari did not add in "from a friend's perspective", likely because she also possessed a slightly shameful teasing side to her. But if someone actually said that to her face, Mari would probably knock them to the floor.

—Back on topic,

Unless the ruckus got out of hand, she wasn't going to interfere — Hattori seemed to be a willing participant anyways — so after making that somewhat one-sided decision, Mari directed her gaze out the window.

She sat in the aisle seat of a two person row.

So she had to look at the person sitting in the window seat.

".....Mari-senpai, what's up?"

An equally listless female student asked Mari after noticing her gaze.

"Hm? No, Kanon, I'm just looking outside."

Mari transferred her focal point from outside to the 2nd Year student sitting next to her, Chiyoda Kanon, who was wearing a handsome smile that was particularly popular among female students.

She was an underclassman that Mari especially favored and Mari was actively prepping her to be the next Public Morals Committee Chief.

Thanks to Tatsuya (if he heard this, he would strongly protest that he was coerced and not asked), Mari had already prepared the transfer documents just for her. If it wasn't Kanon, Mari likely wouldn't even bother.

They were both of the Hundred Families, but Kanon belonged to the Chiyoda Family near the pinnacle. Talented Magicians from prestigious families were the true representation of "Hundred Families".

Here, the "Hundred Families" didn't actually mean the number broke one hundred.

Just as the hundreds digit followed the tens digit, the same meaning applied in that they were "families that were second only to the Ten Master Clans".

In addition, the Ten Master Clans did not consist of only ten families. There were a total of 28 families worthy of the name the Ten Master Clans, and whoever possessed the strongest magic (notice that this was not the most talented, but the strongest), the top ten would be collectively known as the Ten Master Clans.

Mayumi's Saegusa Family always boasted a large number of talented Magicians, whereas the Yotsuba Family possessed one of the strongest Magicians in the modern era. The "Demon Lord of the Far East", the "Midnight Queen", Yotsuba Maya was the current head of house, which caused both families to be acknowledged as the twin aces of the Ten Master Clans.

Currently, the Ten Master Clans consisted of "Ichijou", "Futatsugi", "Mitsuya", "Yotsuba", "Itsuwa", "Mutsudzuka", "Saegusa", "Yatsushiro", "Kudou", and "Juumonji", which just happened to number from one to ten chronologically. However, this was the first time this had occurred since the Ten Master Clans had been formed, and there have been situations where one or two numbers were either duplicated or missing altogether.

The strongest of the strong became the Ten Master Clans, with the other 18 families as replacements, followed closely by the authentic "Hundred Families".

Kanon belonged to the Chiyoda Family, which was one of the Hundred Families. Kanon's direct attack power rivaled Mari herself and if she had a weapon in hand, her firepower could match Magicians from the Ten Master Clans themselves. No wonder she had the magic worthy of the name of the Chiyoda Family.

However, the crowning difference from Mayumi was that Kanon wasn't listless because she was overwhelmed with family business.

Hearing Mari's response, Kanon softly said "Is that so" and directed her gaze outside, followed with a lazy "Heh....." sigh.

This ridiculous response only irritated Mari further.

"Kanon....."

"Yeah?"

Kanon turned around again, but this time she smiled in a fashion completely different from before.

Unfortunately, the imitation paled before the original, as Mari smiled back in an equally radiant manner — from a female perspective.

"It's at most two more hours to the dorms, can you not wait for that long?"

"Hey, that's mean! I'm not a child, I can wait for a paltry two or three hours!"

At Mari's casual question, Kanon was suddenly fired up like she was another person.

Her middle length hair bobbed as she pouted and complained.

"But, but, I thought we would be on the bus together today, so it's OK if I'm a little upset."

"Haven't you guys been together..... Even if you're engaged, counting the time you two have been together, that's probably longer than 'that pair' of Shiba siblings, right?"

"It's impossible to share a bus trip these days, so I was really looking forward to it. I mean, last year I was all alone. And when compared with siblings, of course engaged couples share more time together!"

"......Really?"

"Of course!"

Kanon puffing out her chest — which was slightly insulting and not altogether flattering – declared this to which Mari secretly sighed again.

This underclassman was usually decisive and dependable with a strong and active personality, which were qualities Mari admired in the young lady, but.....

(Every time, the moment she gets to Isori it's like she's someone else entirely.....)

"Speaking of which, why does the technician team have to hitch a different ride! It's not like they can do anything during the ride, so why are they in a separate car! This bus has enough seats for all of us, and even if that wasn't the case, we could still charter a double-decker bus!"

Kanon seemed to have seized upon the proper venue and started to loudly vent her frustration. At this, Mari could only sigh again.

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On the bus, there was another young woman who also shared Kanon's displeasure.

—This young lady did not make a fuss like Kanon, which only served to increase her friends' trepidation.

"....."

"......Uh, Miyuki, would you like some tea.....?"

"Honoka, thank you. However, I'm sorry, but I'm not thirsty right now. I'm not like Onii-sama, who was ordered out into the hot sun to stand watch."

Her voice was both calm and gentle.

Just like the chill that someone would feel upon gazing at the fine layer of frost that covered the landscape.

"Ah, uh, you're right."

Honoka quickly agreed as someone on the other side of the aisle sharply nudged her flank.

(Why are you reminding her of her brother!)

(It's not like I meant to do that!)

Honoka and Shizuku weren't telepathic but were still able to communicate with their eyes because maybe they both wanted to "do something" for the silently fuming Miyuki?

".....Seriously, since we know who was going to be late, there was no reason for him to wait outside the bus..... Why is Onii-sama always doing so much....."

Miyuki finally started to mutter aloud, which only increased the terrifying tension around her.

Honoka wanted to flee.

At the very least, she wanted to switch places with Shizuku.

But if she switched seats at this juncture, she would surely incur Miyuki's wrath.

—Scratch that, Miyuki wouldn't actually do anything to her friends, but the dangerous feeling surrounding her was enough to cause people to let one's imagination run wild (speaking of which, the 1st Year female student sitting next to Shizuku was huddled in a ball and keeping her eyes glued outside).

".....And he's sitting in a tiny storage vehicle crowded with equipment..... At least during the trip, I had hoped Onii-sama could get some proper rest....."

Shizuku glanced at the terrified Honoka and sighed.

Shizuku believed that Miyuki omitted the three words "next to me" (in other words, Shizuku mentally adjusted this to be "Onii-sama could get some proper rest next to me"), but she said something completely different.

"Still, Miyuki, this is where I think your older brother is amazing."

Shizuku took the opportunity of starting a conversation to switch seats with Honoka.

Honoka clasped both her palms together in thanks, but Shizuku couldn't see this with her back to her and Miyuki didn't notice this either.

Miyuki was wholly unaware that someone else had caught her muttering to herself, so she was unable to immediately react.

Shizuku seized the opening to keep speaking, completely shattering her normally stoic image.

"Even if he waited on the bus, I don't think anyone would actually complain about it, but your brother dutifully fulfilled his mission to 'verify all contestants had boarded'. It's true that this seems like an unimportant chore, but he didn't take this boring task lightly and was able to maintain his composure even though something unexpected happened, which isn't easy at all. Miyuki's brother is really amazing."

It was thanks to Shizuku's personality that she was able to say such a mushy comment aloud. Honoka was more the type to think those thoughts in the privacy of her mind.

".....You're right, Onii-sama is the nicest person in the oddest areas."

Finally, Miyuki was able to contain her embarrassment and the icy pressure around them faded as well.

Hiding behind Shizuku, Honoka made a victory sign with her hand.

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With a few exceptions, human beings chose only to see things they wish to see.

More likely, "they chose to ignore objects that they did not want to perceive".

For biological organisms, bad news from the five senses was usually more vital than good news. Objects and situations that were displeasing often caused harm to the physical body, so identifying these threats were integral to survival.

However, humans often avert their eyes from what they do not wish to see.

For example, even knowing that a weapon of mass destruction was currently aimed at them, they still chose to ignore this aspect of reality.

This was especially true for citizens of first world countries that are so removed from struggling for survival in their day to day activities.

Even without this exaggerated example, there were countless examples every day where people pretend not to see things that are repulsive and pretend that they didn't exist.

—Such as, the sheer killing intent emanating from a beautiful young lady.

Miyuki, who had returned to her usual serene grace, was surrounded by male students.

Who, until this moment, did not dare to approach.

Miyuki was gorgeous enough to cause anyone to stop in their tracks, so no one dared to crowd her too much, but whenever an opportunity presented itself someone would immediately try to strike up a conversation. The majority of these offenders were 1st Year students, with the occasional 2nd or 3rd Year student.

Finally, Mari couldn't stand it any longer and forcibly relocated Miyuki and the other two to sit behind her.

Thus, with Miyuki and the now tranquil Kanon, much happier after venting, occupying the two window seats, Mari sitting beside Kanon, and Katsuto holding down the fort behind Miyuki, peace finally returned to the bus (Mayumi was sleeping soundly, likely satisfied after thoroughly teasing Hattori).

While it was pleasurable to speak with people of the same gender, there was something missing.

The two young ladies who shared this thought both absently watched the scenery passing by.

So Miyuki and Kanon were the first two to discover the situation.

"Watch out!"

Kanon was the one who shouted out.

Following her voice, just about everyone in the car looked out the window on one side of the bus.

From the opposite direction, a large vehicle — this was a smaller bus used for leisurely pursuits — was sliding towards them on the ground, scattering sparks everywhere.

Someone shouted that the tires burst.

Another agitated passenger claimed that the tires fell off.

There was no sense of danger in their voices.

There was a central divider between the two sides of the highway, further fortified by a protective barrier.

Basically, there was no way for the accident to spread over here.

In their young and inexperienced eyes, this disaster on the other side was only something to stimulate them.

A stimulation — that lasted for one second.

Someone shrieked.

Maybe more than one person.

This was hardly their fault.

The large vehicle suddenly spun as it collided with the central divider and, for some reason, flipped into the air towards them.

The bus slammed on the brakes, sending everyone careening forward.

The screams of pain were likely caused by the students who ignored the safety regulations and failed to buckle their seat belts.

The bus stopped.

Thankfully, they stopped short of impact.

However, the fallen vehicle was still sliding towards the bus while aflame.

"Let me shove it back!"

"Disappear!"

"Halt!"

"Oh!"

There was no panic aboard the bus, which was something worthy of praise.

But that only served to worsen the situation.

Without warning, several instances of magic shot forward and all tried to apply the phenomenon rewriting ability at the same time on the same object.

The only thing this would achieve would be to scramble all the magics against each other and do nothing to prevent the incoming disaster.

"You idiots, stop now!"

Mari quickly realized this.

Fortunately, everyone was still in the activation process and had not finished yet.

So everyone was forced to recall their half-formed magic, leaving a few precious seconds for some sort of meaningful defense.

They needed a powerful magic to instantly rewrite the current phenomenon.

Everyone gathered on board were the saplings and seeds of future Magicians, but they were all capable of doing this.

However — if they were able to logically follow Mari's orders, they wouldn't have tried to recklessly use magic.

Also, in order to overwrite the original effects of the magic and achieve the desired result, they had to use a stronger magic to forcibly overwrite the currently activated magic—

"Juumonji!"

Mari summoned a Magician capable of performing this feat.

Katsuto was currently readying his magic.

But Mari almost despaired at seeing his pale and agitated visage.

Mari understood as well.

This pocket of space where Magic Sequences were running amok was just like what would happen during "Calculation Interference".

Even Katsuto had no way of handling both the oncoming impact and roaring flames at the same time.....

"Leave the flames to me!"

The slim and beautiful figure of a 1st Year student rose near the window.

Her magic was already prepped and ready.

Seeing this, Katsuto immediately started designing the Magic Sequence for a fortifying barrier.

Yet, regardless of how incredibly talented she was, was this 1st Year student able to use her magic in this veritable storm of psions—?

For a second, Mari thought she was hallucinating.

She was a Magician fully capable of understanding magic, but she still questioned her own senses there.

Just as Miyuki was about to invoke her magic with the flaming metal hulk bearing down on them.....

The rampaging Magic Sequences all disappeared in an instant.

As if waiting for this moment to occur, Miyuki immediately activated her magic.

She wasn't freezing the flaming vehicle nor cutting off the air supply to suffocate the driver (though in this case, the chance that the driver survived was remote), she was efficiently using magic to dramatically lower the temperature to extinguish the flames.

Mari could not help but applaud her choice of action.

At the same time, this proved that Mari's magic perception ability was working normally.

Katsuto spread out the protective barrier magic — this was a Movement-Type Systematic Magic that creates a force field that renders any object that enters its boundaries immobile — causing the already ruined vehicle to crumple upon impact. Mari looked elsewhere when she heard the sound of impact (Mari trusted that Katsuto's magic would be able to hold the incoming vehicle).

What the heck just happened?

The interfering remnants of Magic Sequences suddenly disappeared just before magic was applied to avoid the accident, but what the heck caused that?

Was it Mayumi's magic?

Mari immediately rejected this notion that floated into her head.

It was true that Mayumi was able to handle the rampant Magic Sequences.

However, Mayumi's Counter Magic (magic deployed specifically against magic) was shaped like psion bullets that used copies of Magic Sequences to tear them apart.

That type of magic couldn't completely annihilate every Magic Sequence down to the last iota.

If Mayumi's magic was synonymous to precision anti-aircraft guns, then the earlier magic (if it was magic at all) was something that would have carpet bombed the entire district. Not a single pillar would be left standing, steel would turn molten, the foundations and cement would scatter everywhere from the explosions, rendering this entire area into complete rubble — that was how violent that attack was.

While Mari and Katsuto were both frozen before the primal chaos of the rampaging Magic Sequences, Miyuki seemed to know from the start that this situation would fade and activated her magic without any hesitation.

Did she know who cast that "magic"?

Hold on, was that magic.....?

"Is everyone alright?"

Mari was staring at the storage vehicle — currently parked behind them — that was following them, and only recovered herself and turned around upon hearing Mayumi's steady voice.

"That was cutting it a little close, but there's no need for concern. Juumonji and Miyuki-chan's excellent performances saved us from disaster. Anyone who's hurt better realize how important safety belts are, so make sure to buckle up next time."

Mayumi added "so long as there isn't a next time" with a smile, causing laughter to fill the bus.

Everyone shook off the intense anxiety and terror and resumed a more relaxed expression.

"Juumonji, thanks, you're just as dependable as ever."

"No..... Thanks to the fire quickly being extinguished, I could focus solely on stopping the vehicle. Also, did Saegusa get rid of the rampant Magic Sequences?"

Hearing Katsuto's question, Mayumi's eyes drifted awkwardly.

"Ah! I only noticed after the bus stopped....."

Speaking of which, Mayumi was sleeping up until the moment of the accident.

Katsuto also realized this, so he only raised an eyebrow slightly but made no further comment — Katsuto was undoubtedly the most honorable person among the student body leaders.

"Ah, Miyuki-chan as well. Your execution was flawless. You were able to use such a narrow window to construct a perfect Magic Sequence. That's an accomplishment that even us 3rd Year students would be hard pressed to emulate."

Katsuto and Mari both nodded in agreement at Mayumi's words.

All three of them knew very well that being able to correctly choose the appropriate magic and modulate it under such critical circumstances was no small feat.

Mayumi's praise caused Miyuki to blush deeply.

"President, I am honored by your praise. However, thanks to Ichihara-senpai's powerful assistance in halting the bus, I had sufficient time to construct the Magic Sequence, otherwise even I'm afraid that I may have hurried my move in such a trying condition. Ichihara-senpai, thank you."

Miyuki gravely bowed in thanks, to which Suzune silently nodded in response.

Kanon, who was sitting in front of Miyuki, turned around in her chair with an utterly gob smacked expression.

Mari was also unable to hide her astonishment.

Just as Miyuki said, there was no way the bus could've come to a halt in time with the brakes alone.

The moment the driver slammed on the brakes, it wasn't hard to imagine someone also using Speed Magic to help out.

But Mari only noticed everyone using magic to stop the incoming vehicle and was wholly ignorant of Suzune casting magic to stop the bus.

While everyone was preoccupied with visually confirming the danger, she accurately made the correct response.

Suzune's proficiency in magic was said to rival Mari and company, and today she more than sustained that reputation. Also, Miyuki was the only one who detected Suzune's magic while everyone else remained ignorant; her talent was truly awe-inspiring.

"In comparison, you....."

"Ow! Mari-senpai, why did you hit me?"

Suddenly being knocked atop the head, Kanon complained tearfully.

"Stuff it, Kanon, do you have any right to complain? Morisaki and Kitayama both panicked and used magic to complicate the situation, but that's only to be expected since they're 1st Year students. But what's the deal with you as a 2nd Year student panicking first!"

"Uh, but my reaction was the fastest, I just didn't expect anyone else to overlap on magic....."

Kanon's explanation caused both Morisaki and Shizuku to droop in shame.

Quite a few others revealed awkward expressions.

"Fastest isn't always better! At least evaluate the situation first, then make some sort of rudimentary communication between each other to avoid ambiguity, alright? On top of that, based on the fact that you still didn't deactivate your magic even after noticing the conflicting situation proves that you had already lost your objectivity."

".....I was wrong, I'm sorry."

Seeing Kanon's dejected state, Mari didn't go any further.

Even with this lecture, without the requisite training and experience, it was very difficult to remain calm under those circumstances.

When taking that into account, it was even more amazing that Miyuki was able to clearly communicate her decision to extinguish the flames.

This wasn't something that relied on talent alone. Usually, geniuses tend to try and stick out too much, which actually hurts more since it compromises communication.

By this definition, Kanon possessed an exemplary genius mentality.

Miyuki must have gone through extensive and arduous training.

Her serene patience in waiting for the bus to resume moving was perfectly suited for her experiences, or completely unsuitable at the same time.

"Speaking of which, Shiba."

"Yes."

Mari called Tatsuya by name, but referred to Miyuki by surname.

Generally, she preferred to address others by surname and only called closer companions such as Mayumi, Kanon, and members of the Public Morals Committee by their name. To her, Tatsuya was someone who she was especially close to.

"Do you know how those Magic Sequences..... No, never mind, don't worry about it, you performed magnificently."

"Ah? Thank you for your compliment."

Originally, Mari wanted to ask the question "Do you know who used Counter Magic to erase those Magic Sequences?"

In the middle, she ruminated on whether she wanted to know the answer.

For some reason, Mari felt that the answer would cause devastating damage to "certain" objects in her immediate vicinity.

Outside the window, the male students from the technician team descended from the storage vehicles and commenced rescue operations.

That being said, the all-terrain vehicle not only violently struck the protective barrier and flipped through the air, it was also ablaze as well.

There was no chance the driver survived.

There were no women present, likely because the male students wished to spare them from the sight of the burning corpse.

Even though the fire was put out, the possibility that the ethanol-based gasoline would re-ignite was not zero.

Behind the 3rd Year students trying to cut out the door, a 1st Year student was using a camera to record the evidence.

Realizing that her eyes were continuously following his back, Mari swiftly averted her gaze.

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After the incident, including the time spent during police interviews and assisting with clean up so that the bus could pass, roughly 30 minutes elapsed since the incident ended. Figure in the delay from the start of the trip, the group arrived at the dorms shortly after noon.

From a strictly competitive standpoint, most of the contestants that excel during the Nine Schools Competition eventually join the military.

To safeguard their source of talented Magicians, the military heavily invested in the Nine Schools Competition in both the competition arena and the dormitories. Hotels previously reserved for government officials during inspection or visiting foreign dignitaries and their followers were instead allocated for students and related personnel during the Nine Schools Competition.

That being said, it wasn't like the situation was all-encompassing.

In the end, the hotel was a military building, so there was no valet parking or suites. Usually, the soldiers on duty at this location would be responsible for these missions, but the Nine Schools Competition was a high school event. So, the students were responsible for carrying their own luggage. The larger devices were left in the storage vehicles for easy access so they didn't have to be removed, but the smaller tools and CADs had to be shifted from the vehicles to the individual rooms for maintenance.

A certain 1st Year student from the technician team quickly accomplished his objectives. Pushing a cart full of luggage forward and being accompanied by a smiling female student walking next to him, a sight that caused Hattori to shake his head with a heavy expression on his face.

"Hattori, what's up? Take a look at your hangdog expression."

Behind him, a warm voice struck up a conversation.

"Kirihara..... Nah, it's nothing."

Hattori turned around and verified that the man was indeed his good friend based on his voice, and reflexively responded with a vague answer.

"Really? At least you look like something's awry."

He probably noticed himself.

Hattori didn't continue to deny Kirihara's words and let out a masochistic smirk.

"I've..... lost some confidence."

"Oh please, the competition is the day after tomorrow, what's with the doom and gloom?"

Kirihara was only responsible for "Crowd Ball" on the second day, but Hattori was scheduled for "Battle Board" on the first and third days as well as "Monolith Code" on the ninth and tenth days.

Hattori was on a different competition tier than Kirihara and was one of the primary aces for the 2nd Year cohort.

If his status was anything short of excellent, this would severely impact the overall team strategy.

Thus, it was surprising for Kirihara to panic at this stage.

"So why are you so depressed?"

In Kirihara's eyes, Hattori Gyoubu was a studious young man bursting with confidence, or maybe someone who worked arduously to earn that confidence.

Just in his second year alone, Hattori possessed the strength just second to the big three. This distinction was not earned on talent alone, although this did feed his arrogance — a point that his friend didn't try to defend — and was the subject of much misinterpretation, but his diligence matched his abundant talent at the highest level. At least, that was how Kirihara had always seen Hattori.

Hard working, talented and accomplished. With these three under his belt, there was no reason why he should suddenly lose the wind in his sails.....

"Looks like you haven't noticed, how I envy you....."

"What is this? Are you insinuating that I'm stupid?"

"No, but I do think you're slow."

"Hey!"

Hattori's usual mocking smile that was easily misunderstood by others returned.

He appeared to have recovered his balance.

That Hattori was able to improve his mood by digging Kirihara put a sour taste in Kirihara's mouth, but at least he wasn't worried any more.

".....This isn't like you, right? What exactly has dragged you down recently?"

Kirihara asked again with the full intention of returning the favor.

Hattori was not dull enough to misunderstand his friend's clumsy concern.

"That earlier incident....."

"Ah~, that was too close."

"Yeah, and if nothing happened, I think a lot of people would've been hurt or even lost their lives."

"But didn't the President and company handily deal with it? Isn't worrying about nonexistent injuries a sign of general anxiety? This sort of reverse thinking is harmful to mental health."

Kirihara's forthright comment caused Hattori to laugh lightly.

"Kirihara, I really envy your ability to let it go, but that's not what I'm considering."

Hattori stopped for a moment then shook his head again.

".....At the time, I couldn't do anything at all."

"That's because if you acted without thinking, that would only worsen the situation. I think that holding back shows that you maintained a level head during a crisis."

Kirihara's words were meant to be comforting and not superficial lip service at all. From his objective analysis of the situation, Hattori also acknowledged his words.

Even so, Hattori's expression remained heavy.

"However..... Shiba-san adopted the correct choice of action. She chose the appropriate task based on her expertise and did not forget to alert everyone of her actions. Even if the conflicting Magic Sequences did not suddenly disappear before she invoked her magic, she should have been able to team up with Group Leader Juumonji to handle the situation."

"At the time, Chief Watanabe also didn't act. Given that Shiba-san specializes in Freezing-Type Magic, isn't this just a matter of magic suitability?"

"Watanabe-senpai's expertise lies in anti-personnel combat, so she was holding back as a method of self-restraint for the benefit of the whole. In that situation, I am able to accomplish more objectives.

.....No, the question at hand isn't about Magic Power. Watanabe-senpai instantly made the correct assessment that she was not the correct person to do the job and called on Group Leader Juumonji to assist. Before she even said anything, Group Leader Juumonji already realized that this was a situation he would be called upon and was already constructing his Magic Sequence. They also came to the conclusion that just the Group Leader alone was insufficient to combat this threat, but didn't panic and use magic haphazardly. Shiba-san calmly determined what she could do and verbalized this to everyone.

The problem is not just about strong or weak Magic Powers or the ability to use diverse or powerful magics or simply a technical issue, but as a Magician, are you able to use the appropriate magic in the right circumstances — yes, the problem isn't 'magic' talent, but the 'Magician's' talent. There is no doubt her Magic Power is staggering and on pure strength alone there's an 80% chance I would lose to her. However, until today, I've never worried about that point, because a Magician's quality is not measured solely by the level of their Magic Power. But — when

compared to my underclassman, I am not only lacking magic talent, but also in talent as a Magician..... This is thoroughly depressing."

Hattori once more turned a glum expression while Kirihara adopted a "what am I going to do with you" look.

"Ah~ that's a matter of life experiences, and that's where I think that pair of siblings are particularly special."

"Siblings?"

His evaluation was not on "her" but "that pair of siblings", catching Hattori off guard and causing him to look at Kirihara in a quizzical manner.

"That brother of hers..... I'm guessing he's offed someone before."

"Offed?"

Hattori's incredulous voice carried a note of shock.

"Yes, he's killed someone before, and not just one or two people."

".....You don't actually mean homicide, do you? You're referring to actual combat experience?"

"He does give people that feeling..... You know that my dad was in the marines right?"

"Yeah, I remember he had been deployed to Tsushima Island several times?"

This felt like an abrupt change in topic, but Hattori didn't dwell on this point and continued with Kirihara's conversation.

"Dad was only a corporal, but on the other hand, because he was a low-ranking officer, he was deployed to the front lines where he got to know a lot of soldiers who spent their days in the trenches. Occasionally, some of Dad's old war buddies would come over to my house, and they give off a completely different vibe from normal people. Regardless of whether it's kenjutsu or shooting, no matter how much we train in combat tactics and martial techniques, the sheer killing intent given off by soldiers who have killed in the heat of combat differs from athletes that haven't. Do you know the details behind the incident in April?"

Another change in topic.

"Why did you bring this up..... I heard that was caused by anti-magic terrorists. I only know that the terrorist cell was cleared out by Juumonji."

Hattori was displeased with the abrupt change in direction but kept a lid on his annoyance. Instinctively, he felt this was all connected.

"Is that so..... Then I can't go into too much detail..... Although since it's you, I think I can take it to this level. I was present at the suppression of the terrorists, as well as the Shiba siblings."

".....Really?"

"I can understand why you would ask that, but that's the truth. There, I think I saw Shiba — the older Shiba's natural instinct."

"Natural instinct?"

Compared to Kirihara's current words, his voice also carried a tinge of trepidation, which caused Hattori to immediately fire back a question.

"Yes, natural instinct, or at least a part of it. It was terrifying. He had the same quality the soldiers on the front line had but his killing intent was several times more intense, like a thick coating of killing intent covering him like a great coat. He was dangerous enough to cause a shiver to run down my spine, enough to make me wonder what a guy like that's doing in high school."

Kirihara's mouth may have said this, but his expression seemed very agitated.

".....There should be no way to hide his age."

Hattori was feigning naivety. This slightly off-tangent impression was a better gauge of his astonishment than the expression on his face.

"This only goes to show that age doesn't equate to experiences."

Kirihara could understand why his friend was so stunned, but because he had also been in the same position he didn't make light of Hattori's tangent and only smiled wryly in reply.

Hattori looked to ask again, but this time there was a blatant hesitation in his voice.

".....Shiba-san as well?"

This hesitation was largely born from an "unable to believe" mentality. On the other hand, Kirihara seemed immune to this thought — probably heavily influenced by his girlfriend since spring — and answered his friend's question in a frank manner.

"I didn't witness exactly what the sister did, but given that the older brother was willing to bring her to the combat zone, she definitely isn't an ordinary girl. You know from today that the most beautiful rose has her own thorns, but not only that, she's probably more like the peacock that possesses both the sharp talons and malevolent beak capable of hunting poisonous serpents, right? Pursuing her is like having a death wish. Ignorance is bliss, eh?"

Kirihara's last two sentences weren't for Hattori's ears, but a subtle hint for the hapless male students surrounding Miyuki on the car.

"But I never thought that the Hattori with 'that kind of personality' would say something like this."

Hattori was still digesting all of this information while Kirihara sent a bemused smirk his way.

"......What do you mean?"

The hidden meaning behind Kirihara's smirk rubbed Hattori the wrong way, prompting his displeased rejoinder.

However, Kirihara's delighted smirk was not diminished in the slightest.

"A Magician's quality is not measured by their Magic Power alone, eh? Wouldn't the President be very pleased upon hearing that you personally said those words?"

"Huh.....!"

Hattori glared darkly at Kirihara.

Yet, Kirihara maintained his bright smile, no, thanks to Hattori's overreaction, his smile grew even wider, which caused Hattori to be the first one to turn aside.

"Let's table quality for the moment, but Magic Power is definitely not the only indicator of strength."

Hattori took a step forward without any warning at all, clearly signifying his intent to leave Kirihara behind. Still, Kirihara ignored this blatant protest and followed Hattori's footsteps as he continued.

"The difference between Blooms and Weeds lies in the difference in technical scores on the entrance exam. Certainly there are Course 1 students who progress rapidly, but there are also people stagnating as well. Take Chiyoda for example, she's completely different than her arrogant self last summer who rested her laurels on talent. The Course 2 students are the same, and, so long as they don't self destruct, surely some of them would become stronger? .....No, this isn't pure speculation, there are quite a few 'capable' guys in Course 2 right now, and doubly more so in this year's batch. Oh by the way, I'm not saying this just because I lost to the older Shiba."

Hattori's shoulders shook violently.

Seeing this, Kirihara thought, "Oh right, this guy also got his ass handed to him on a platter."

"At any rate, I admit that he's stronger than me right now. But even if that guy is approaching cheating levels in terms of strength, I don't plan on always admitting defeat. I will continue to train myself and triumph the next time I challenge him. If I give up solely because I'm not as capable now, then I'm always a loser.

Currently, many Course 2 students give up because they're not as capable as others, hence why they've never improved. We have no obligation to accept them as our equals. On the other hand, for those that seek greater strength and better themselves along the way, we have no reason to scorn them either."

Hattori still had no response as he quickly advanced towards his own room without a word.

Kirihara shrugged and turned to see the pair of siblings who were the topic of their discussion.

Not far behind Kirihara, the younger Shiba was solemnly watching her older brother.

Seeing this, Kirihara thought, "Let's hope nothing troublesome happens".

And promptly mocked himself for this random thought.

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Kirihara's premonition headed in the direction he least desired and struck his fragile but earnest hope.

"Then, according to Onii-sama, that earlier incident was not accidental.....?"

His sister frowned as she asked this question, to which Tatsuya subtly nodded in reply as he pushed the cart forward.

"The vehicle's trajectory was too unnatural and the investigation yielded the expected results. There were remnants of magic left on the vehicle."

Tatsuya modulated his volume to avoid eavesdroppers and Miyuki emulated her older brother's soft tones.

"But I didn't see anything....."

While the literal meaning of those words were a denial, Miyuki never doubted her brother for a moment.

She had a front row seat to the "accident" from the start.

And until the last moment, she never felt a trace of the other side using magic.

Her brother was different. Miyuki could only see the "present", but all of the "past" were within her brother's purview.

Miyuki knew that if her brother had determined "there were remnants", then that was the truth of the matter.

"At the time, they used small scale magic within the tightest time frames possible, which is a high level technique designed to avoid leaving remnant psions from the Magic Sequence at the scene. Our opponent was likely an agent who had undergone specialized training, which is all the more pitiful given that he was a sacrifice."

"A..... sacrifice?"

That sentence had an ominous meaning, causing Miyuki's voice to be weaker than she intended.

"Magic was used three times during the incident, first the magic that burst the tire, second the magic that caused the vehicle to spin, and the last to apply force diagonally upwards in order to use the protective railing as a launch pad.

All three were cast within the vehicle in order to hide the fact that they used magic. In reality, most of the Magicians on hand didn't detect this, including you as well. 'At the time', I was also unaware, that's how well this was played. Especially the last technique, for the Magician to be aboard a spinning vehicle and still be able to pinpoint the exact moment of impact with the railing must have required intense training."

"Then, the one who used magic was....."

"The culprit is the Magician in the driver's seat. In other words, a suicide attack."

Miyuki stopped short and lowered her head.

Her shoulders were slightly trembling.

"How despicable.....!"

This was not an expression of sadness, but fury.

His sister did not bear a misguided sense of compassion towards the criminal, but a deep sense of anger at the mastermind who gave the order. Satisfied, Tatsuya nodded.

"Criminals and terrorists originally are the scum of the Earth, and their leaders are rarely the type to gamble with their own lives, which can easily be seen from this example. There would be no end if we became enraged every time this occurred. Besides, I'm more concerned with the intent behind all of this."

Tatsuya gently patted his sister's back a few times to comfort her, then resumed pushing the cart forward.

Miyuki swiftly followed behind.

—And stopped not ten steps away.

A young lady sitting on a couch near the wall waved at them. She wore a pair of shorts and braided sandals that showed off her toned legs, as well as a vest that clearly revealed both shoulders.

Tatsuya also came to a stop alongside Miyuki and glanced over at his friend who then stopped waving and rose from the sofa. She apparently mistook this location for a tropical beach resort.

"It's been a week, how have you guys been?"

"Hm, not bad..... Speaking of which, Erika, why are you here?"

"To cheer you guys on, of course."

After a short exchange of greetings, Miyuki asked in a bewildered manner, to which Erika replied frankly.

Of course, Miyuki anticipated this sort of answer but was also unable to accept it.

"But the competition starts two days from now."

"Yep, I know."

Erika's personality veered towards that of a mischievous child who delighted in teasing others, often making it very hard to get to the point.

"Miyuki, I'm leaving first. Erika, see you around."

Tatsuya immediately elected to abandon further questioning and, leaving Miyuki and Erika in the lobby, moved the overflowing push cart towards the room reserved for the technician team.

"Ah, uh, see you later..... Hold it, at least let me say hi?"

"Sorry, the senpais from the technician team are waiting for Onii-sama. So why are you here two days early?"

Miyuki apologized on behalf of her brother before asking further.

"Tonight's the meet and greet, right?"

"....."

"....."

".....So?"

Miyuki waited for Erika to reply, but she felt that no matter how long she waited, she still wouldn't get a full answer, so Miyuki was forced to change the subject.

"I should probably caution you. Unrelated personnel are not permitted access to the dinner, and that includes students."

"Ah, don't worry, we got that covered."

"Ah? You said....."

"Erika, the key to the room..... Eh, Miyuki-san?"

Miyuki wanted to ask "You said something about having it covered?", but was interrupted by a voice of an approaching young lady.

"Mizuki, you came too?"

"Miyuki-san, good afternoon..... What is it?"

Mizuki heard Miyuki questioning Erika and warmly greeted her, but noticed that Miyuki was staring at her in place of a greeting, causing her to smile awkwardly.

".....Quite conspicuous."

"Uh..... really?"

Mizuki glanced at herself uneasily. Today, she was wearing an upper garment with thin shoulder straps plus a skirt that was several inches higher above the knees. For some people, she was probably more tempting than Erika.

On first impulse, Miyuki thought something like "Did everyone mistake this for a summer resort?".

"Erika said not to dress too conservatively, so....."

"Is that so....."

Miyuki wanted to say a few choice words to Erika, but seeing her feign ignorance and turn her head, Miyuki gave this up as a lost cause.

Miyuki could now sympathize why her brother often sighed when dealing with Erika.

"Mizuki, I'm saying this for your benefit, but you might want to get changed. The getup is adorable and suits you perfectly, but I think there's a better time and place."

However, Miyuki didn't just smile and nod. Her personality was slightly more righteous than her brother, and more obstinate as well.

"Is that..... so? .....Really?"

"Yes, you should."

Mizuki peered at Erika as she asked her, while Miyuki also watched Erika as she nodded in assent.

"Eh~ Really~?"

Erika finally stopped play acting and disagreed with a huff.

"Speaking of room keys, where are you guys staying?"

.....This time, it was Miyuki's turn to ignore that sally.

"Yes."

Mizuki answered while Erika was fuming by the side, but she didn't press Miyuki.

During the past four months, Erika learned from their mutual interactions that this beautiful young lady that looked like she would show leniency towards even bugs possessed a strong and ruthless personality.

"I can't believe there are barred rooms..... No, even more importantly, it's amazing how the hotel actually let you guys stay. I thought ordinary people are barred from access....."

"Here's where you call on your connections."

Her mood restored, Erika revealed the answer without any guilt whatsoever, forcing Miyuki to burst into laughter.

"That's the Chiba Family for you."

While her tone was still joking, Miyuki was in no way paying superficial praise, but actually touching upon the truth.

Just as the Ten Master Clans bear the numbers one through ten in their names, the primary families within the Hundred Families such as Chiyoda, Isori, all bore numbers beyond 11 in their names. The size of the number had no correlation with the strength of the family, but the very fact that one possessed a number in their surname directly equated to a superior bloodline and was an excellent indicator of an individual's potential as a Magician. Magical families that have a number in their names are collectively known as the "Numbered Family System" (This is only one way of estimating ability. Even in First High's Student Council, only Mayumi herself came from the "Numbered Family System").

Erika came from the Chiba Family, which was one of the primary families within the "Numbered Family System".

The Chiba Family was renowned for using personal Speed and Weight Magic in close quarters combat. The Chiba Family's strength lay not in the fact they could adeptly use spells, but in the new system they pioneered for the training and development of close combat Magicians.

Presently, of the Magicians serving as policemen or infantry in the military, it was rumored that half of them were directly trained under the Chiba Family's system. This was the case for the navy and air force as well. Any unit that could encounter close combat situations often petitioned the Chiba Family for training.

If solely dependent on connections within active duty troops, the Chiba Family's influence may eclipse that of the Ten Master Clans.

"But is that OK? I thought Erika loathed using the family as backup....."

"I dislike other people simply seeing me as a 'daughter of the Chiba Family'. Connections are made to be used, it's your loss if you ignore it."

If this was anyone else, this answer could cause a combative atmosphere, but because the two others were Miyuki and Mizuki, they didn't take it to heart.

"Hehe, you're right. Now, I should go organize my luggage. I don't know how you guys are a part of this, but I'll see you at dinner."

Miyuki walked towards the elevator with Erika waving at her and Mizuki looking on.

"Hey, Erika, can't you carry your own bags?"

"Shibata-san, I have your baggage over here. I apologize for bringing it without permission, but there were too many people at the counter."

Halfway there, Miyuki heard two young men call out to Erika and Mizuki.

One of the voices was familiar, but the other was completely foreign.

So it wasn't two girls, but two pairs of men and women.

Miyuki secretly smiled without stopping or turning her head.

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Speaking of which, why is it that Miyuki's bus arrived two days before the competition begins?

That was because of the banquet being held in the evening.

Since this was a high school event after all, no alcoholic beverages were served. The buffet-style banquet without any prearranged seating for the contestants about to battle it out was almost like a miniature opening ceremony. Compared to the festive aura of the previous years, anxiety reigned supreme this year.

"In reality, I really didn't want to attend....."

As the Student Council President, this was something that Mayumi couldn't and shouldn't say, so Tatsuya politely struck that from the record.

Technician teams were auxiliary members, but counted as official members for the purposes of actual on site activities, so they were also obligated to attend. Tatsuya, who was ill at ease with reception events like banquets, privately agreed with Mayumi's sentiment.

The dress code for the banquet was each school's uniforms, so they didn't have to worry on that account. That being said, the borrowed suit didn't fit him very well, which raised his resistance towards attending.

"Should we have purchased a new one.....?"

His fidgeting had been noticed after all.

Miyuki furrowed her brows in concern as she watched Tatsuya.

"It's nothing, don't worry about it. Sorry for making you worry."

This sequence thoroughly shamed Tatsuya, as it was getting difficult to tell who the older sibling was. In addition, this was an official event with mandatory attendance, so one shouldn't complain that they were uncomfortable or displeased.

"No, Onii-sama, please don't say that."

She probably noticed the minute adjustments to Tatsuya's expression and realized that he had wiped out his depressed mood.

Miyuki smiled happily.

"OK, those siblings over there can stop flirting."

The slightly teasing words caused Tatsuya to glance aside — strictly speaking, he had to glance downwards — to see Mayumi stifling her smile as she watched them.

"I can't believe you said flirting..... What's this?"

On the Internet, Tatsuya had read that some young women have been afflicted with a malady that causes them to see all interactions between different genders as romantic interactions. Truth be told, Tatsuya had several people around him suffering from the same illness, so he really didn't want to broach that subject.

However, Mayumi seemed to be up to her old tricks and only wanted to needle him a little.

Tatsuya had long since accustomed himself to not receiving a straight answer, but still used his eyes to prompt Mayumi to respond.

But Mayumi's gaze wasn't resting on Tatsuya, rather on someone beside him.

At the sight of her trying not to burst out into laughter, Tatsuya followed her line of sight and.....

"Miyuki..... Why are you so embarrassed all of a sudden?"

His sister ducked her head in shame.

"Everyone, let's go."

Mayumi retracted her teasing attitude and urged everyone onward, her mood excellent for some unknown reason.

On some level, Tatsuya was irritated that he had turned into a device for mood improvement, but upon seeing Mayumi's retreating figure move away with lighthearted footsteps, he suddenly thought "Ah, forget it".

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Of the people participating in the Nine Schools Competition, there were 360 contestants alone and over 400 members if the auxiliaries were added in.

On the surface, the attendance of all members is mandatory, but there were many who found some reason to decline.

Even so, this was still a large scale fellowship event that well exceeded 300 people.

The meeting area had to be large enough to accommodate the large number of guests and servants.

As expected, just the hotel's employees and the support from the local base were not sufficient to cover everything. There were also many temporary employees that were obviously teenagers specifically hired for this event walking around in servant uniforms, which was not surprising in the least.

However — finding a familiar face among these temporary employees definitely constituted a surprise.

After a short keynote speech — thankfully this speech was short enough not to induce boredom — Tatsuya immediately headed for the dining area when a familiar voice rang out behind him.

When a familiar voice asked "Would you like a drink?", Tatsuya turned around to find Erika holding a serving tray carrying drinks with one hand.

"So that's what you meant by having it covered....."

"Ah, you heard from Miyuki? So, surprised?"

"....Very."

Erika flashed a pleased smile while Tatsuya had no excess processing power to come up with a witty retort, so he merely nodded in response.

"I can't believe you actually infiltrated here..... Belay that, it's just like you to do this."

After all, that's just what this kind of place is.

Even if they hired hourly interns, they wouldn't easily hire high school students.

Other than that, there's an age restriction as well. Even with a banquet where alcoholic beverages are forbidden, they wouldn't relax the restrictions either. Actually, most of the servants and waitresses circulating the area looked to be in their twenties.

He should probably say "as expected of the Chiba Family".

But she appeared to have used her connections in the wrong place.

"By the way....."

"Hm? What's up?"

"Never mind....."

Tatsuya's tone was muddled, which was entirely unlike him.

After all, it's probably impolite to say "By the way, you've changed a lot" in front of the person in question.

Erika should also be aware that her age was a little different.

Her makeup was considerably more mature.

Even at close range, she looked to be the same age as the other waitresses.

Usually, Erika gave off the impression that she was a lively and beautiful young lady that matched her age perfectly, but her slim figure was also perfectly suited for a more mature look.

(And only her.....?)

Tatsuya noticed to his dismay that his thoughts were slightly uncoordinated.

Erika didn't come alone.

Mizuki should also be here.

Mizuki disliked places with too many people so it was hard to say that she was suited for dealing with customers, so would she be able to serve in this type of situation?

"Hey, Erika, your dress is adorable. I see what you meant by you had it handled."

Miyuki joined the conversation and conveniently covered for the lull in the conversation due to Tatsuya's silence.

"That's how it is. Well, isn't this cute? But Tatsuya-kun seems unwilling to comment on it."

Erika twirled left and right, causing the Victorian-style servant uniform with a miniskirt to lightly dance back and forth with an unhappy tone in her voice.

With Tatsuya suddenly under siege, his naturally agile mind immediately began to formulate a retaliation, but Miyuki beat him to it.

"Erika, it's useless to ask Onii-sama for these things."

Miyuki smiled and shook her head and, compared to Tatsuya, it was Erika who was taken aback as she watched Miyuki.

Miyuki's comment was not covering for Tatsuya nor denying her words, which completely surprised Erika.

—However, that was only Erika jumping to conclusions too early.

"Onii-sama wouldn't be affected by external appearances like a woman's clothes, but admires our innate qualities, so in this type of situation special uniforms hold no interest to him whatsoever."

Tatsuya believed that Miyuki's assessment was both overly high and overly low.

In this case, Tatsuya was concerned about his other friends — especially Mizuki, so he wasn't paying attention to Erika's garb. Of course, he is also capable of praising women's fashion and, if the wardrobe was overly risqué, he certainly wouldn't know where to look.

—No, in this situation, the problem isn't the clothes themselves, but the personality that lay beneath the clothes.

"Oh, so that's how it is, Tatsuya-kun isn't interested in cosplay."

"This is cosplay?"

"I don't think so, but I think the guys see me this way."

The two young maidens left the reticent Tatsuya by the wayside and kept going.

"By guys you mean Saijou-kun?"

"That guy isn't even capable of voicing such an opinion. Miki was the one who said this was cosplay, but I have already sternly chastised him for that."

The last sentence that hinted of danger was clearly imprinted in Tatsuya's ears.

Yet Miyuki didn't seem to understand.

"Miki?"

When the person one is speaking with suddenly sprouts a stranger's nickname, it was only natural for Miyuki to fixate on that.

"......Who is that?"

At Miyuki's question, Erika let out an "Ah" expression.

"That's right, Miyuki wouldn't know."

Erika softly said and bailed before anyone could stop her.

"Nice moves, looks like she has a great sense of balance....."

Seeing Erika weave through the crowd with tray in hand and without spilling a drop, Tatsuya was honestly impressed.

Miyuki thought this comment was a little off topic, but she continued regardless.

"What is going on?"

Actually, Miyuki didn't expect a straight answer.

It was only because she was out of the loop that she actually asked.

However, her brother actually provided her with a clear answer.

"She's going to look for Mikihiko.

You've probably heard the name Yoshida Mikihiko?"

"That's Onii-sama's classmate, correct?"

Miyuki recalled that this name created huge controversy during the announcement for the finals' scores.

"He grew up with Erika. Miyuki probably hasn't met Mikihiko, so she likely wanted to introduce the two of you?"

No wonder, that does seem like something Erika would do.

Including taking off without saying another word.

"Miyuki, there you are."

"Tatsuya-kun is also here."

As the siblings glanced towards the direction Erika vanished off to, a pair of female students struck up a conversation.

"Shizuku, were you looking for me?"

"Honoka, Shizuku..... You two are always together?"

Speaking of which, Tatsuya had always seen the two of them moving in concert, so this question was only out of curiosity and had no intent of probing deeper.

"That's because we're friends, so we have no reason to be apart."

"That's right."

Shizuku answered without any sense of shame, which caused Tatsuya to chuckle wryly at his foolish question.

Starting last month, Tatsuya started to refer to the two of them by name.

The one who "demanded" he do so was Honoka, but from Tatsuya's perspective, he was pressured into accepting by Shizuku's overpowering silence.

"And the others?"

Miyuki was the one who asked.

But her tone was slightly odd.

"Over there."

In the direction that Honoka pointed, a crowd of male students quickly looked elsewhere.

The 1st Year female students in the representation team also stood frozen in the same place.

"They probably want to approach Miyuki, but won't dare with Tatsuya-kun lurking nearby."

"What is this, am I a watchdog now.....?"

Shizuku's speculation elicited a helpless sigh from Tatsuya.

There was a high chance she was correct, so he couldn't just laugh it off.

"Everyone must be in the dark about how to approach Tatsuya-kun."

Honoka's words were meant to be comforting, but Tatsuya knew this was highly possible.

He was self-conscious of the fact that he was an "outlier".

Usually, he was the one who should initiate contact with others, but.....

"Bullshit, everyone here is a student of First High and also on the same team....."

This bombshell was dropped by a new voice.

"Chiyoda-senpai."

Kanon joined Tatsuya's group with a glass (without alcohol of course) held in one hand.

Also holding a glass, Isori was following right behind her.

"Kanon, even though they know better, the body still refuses to obey, that's just human nature."

"Kei, that kind of obstinacy is only allowed in certain venues."

Kanon and Isori referred to each other directly by name.

After all, since they were already engaged, doing so was perfectly natural.

"Both of you raise good points, but currently there is an even easier solution."

Tatsuya suspected that both of them were also busybodies, but if he got dragged into a debate over such a trivial subject, he would be quite unhappy with himself.

Unwilling to interfere with the couple's conversation, Tatsuya sought to deal with this as soon as possible.

"Miyuki, you should meet up with the rest, teamwork is very important."

"But Onii-sama....."

"See me in the evening, the only roommate I have is a machine."

Basically, contestants and auxiliaries are assigned double rooms, but Tatsuya is the only 1st Year student and a Course 2 student to boot, therefore Mayumi made this decision so "there would be no cause for concern" and where he'd be "responsible for watching the machinery", and assigned a two bed, double room (one person in a double room) for Tatsuya to stay.

"Honoka and Shizuku too, drop by if you have the time."

Miyuki was still somewhat peeved, but she knew very clearly why Tatsuya said this.

".....I understand. Then, Onii-sama, see you in the evening."

"We'll call upon you a little later."

"See you later."

Miyuki, Honoka, and Shizuku answered in sequence. Tatsuya felt a displeased gaze sweep over him as he smiled and waved goodbye to the three of them, forcing him to turn around.

"What a mature interaction, but I think that's only delaying the issue."

Tatsuya and Kanon's relationship did not exceed that of casual acquaintances.

Kanon had no reason to comment on Tatsuya's personal relationships, but Tatsuya knew Kanon spoke up out of chivalry, so he opted to face this directly.

"Delaying is fine. That's because this question doesn't need to be solved immediately, and time is the best solution to some problems."

"That....."

Kanon wasn't able to reply, but given her unwilling expression, this young lady was not the type to give up easily.

"Kanon, Shiba-kun is right, speed is not the best solution to everything in the world."

"Still, you are definitely lacking some youthful airs."

Isori's comment was meant to break the ice rather than directly help Tatsuya, but was ruined by someone else cutting into the conversation.

"Mari-senpai."

Towards Mari, who had just entered the conversation, Tatsuya didn't refute her words and merely nodded.

"Isori, Nakajou is looking for you."

Yet, Mari seemed to have taken Tatsuya's reaction in account ahead of time and quickly got to the heart of the matter. Looks like she wasn't here just to mess around with him.

"Excuse me, where is Nakajou-san?"

"Storage vehicle #1. The VIPs are about to speak, so quickly finish what you need to do and drag Nakajou back here. The unimportant VIPs are one thing, but it would be terrible for the school's reputation if we missed the Patriarch's words."

"That's true, I understand."

"Mari-senpai, we're heading out."

Isori followed his orders and quickly departed the premises with Kanon naturally on his heels. Seeing the two of them leave, Mari turned around to face Tatsuya.

"Looks like the measurements are perfect."

"Just a little tight under the arms."

Mari commented as she took in the suit that Tatsuya was wearing and Tatsuya responded while looking down at himself.

"Nothing we can do about that, since this is a backup. Even if the measurements are the same, there's no way to take all the individual differences into consideration. If you wore a larger size, the waist would look terribly large."

"That's true, so there is nothing I can do."

Mari's words sounded like she was smiling wryly while her tone sounded like she was shrugging — although she didn't actually make those motions — so Tatsuya mirrored her as well.

"Wouldn't it be better to purchase a new one?"

There was no ill intent behind Mari's words.

"It's too wasteful to buy a new suit only to wear it twice. If this was a cloth emblem that could be removed when worn then it would be fine, but this....."

As he said this, Tatsuya glanced downwards at his left breast.

At the emblem with the eight petals.

This was a meeting with other schools, so it was integral to identify one another based on school emblem — hence why Tatsuya was forced to wear this uniform.

"Might not just be twice. There's the thesis competition in the fall, so there's no way of guaranteeing that you won't get promoted to Course 1."

Mari was smiling as she said this, but her eyes were dead serious.

Tatsuya scowled as he replied:

"Even if I am selected for the thesis competition, wearing my own uniform shouldn't be a problem. Furthermore, there's no way I can get promoted to Course 1, because to this day there's no precedent or even a rule for it."

Tatsuya's words drew a laugh out of Mari.

"Precedent? I think your current status is already unprecedented, right? History has never seen a Course 2 student like you, so you cannot deny the possibility by saying there's no precedent for it. Rather than saying unprecedented, you should aim to become that 'precedent' and pave the way for future underclassmen like you."

"....."

Seeing Tatsuya's pained expression, Mari once more burst into delighted laughter.

"Well, I'm off to find the brass from the other schools, want to join me?"

".....No thanks, Erika should be looking for me."

The moment Tatsuya brought up Erika, a flicker of doubt flashed across Mari's eyes.

This should probably be saved for future ammunition, eh? Such a thought crossed Tatsuya's mind, but the two of them shared a considerable history, so this was probably inappropriate for joking.

Tatsuya silently watched Mari depart.

"Eh? Where's Miyuki?"

Just as Tatsuya predicted, Erika returned with Mikihiko in tow.

"I sent her back to the other students. She'll drop by my room later this evening, so introductions can be made there."

"Ah, OK."

The first half of Tatsuya's words was directed towards Erika, the latter to Mikihiko.

Rather than being one of regret, Mikihiko's reaction was more like a sigh of relief.

".....No need to force yourself."

".....Ah?"

He wasn't immediately aware that Tatsuya was speaking to him.

Hence why Mikihiko's reaction was half a beat slow.

"Hold on, it's not like that! It's true I'm a little nervous, but....."

"Ew~ Guys just love to show off in front of cute girls."

"Erika is just as beautiful, especially today."

"Eh? Wait a minute, stop that....."

"So?"

Towards the teasing Erika, Tatsuya struck first by using her own tactics against her, then urged Mikihiko onward.

"Tatsuya, you..... No, I'm just embarrassed to be wearing this at my first meeting."

Mikihiko stuttered to a stop then adopted an exhausted expression as he shook his head.

Hearing this, Tatsuya carefully scrutinized Mikihiko and Erika's uniforms again.

Mikihiko was wearing a white collared shirt paired with a black bowtie and vest.

Erika was wearing a black dress that swished back and forth with her white apron and headdress.

Simply put, they weren't butler and serving girl, they were servant and serving girl.

"I don't think that's strange, don't all the employees wear that?"

All the servants in the room were wearing similar clothes as Mikihiko.

"See, Miki is too self-conscious."

"My name is Mikihiko."

It was blatantly obvious from their tone and expressions that they had been down this road before.

Mikihiko seemed very uncomfortable in his current suit. This was probably because he came from a traditional family and detested dressing up as a servant.

"Speaking of which, where are the other two?"

Tatsuya really wanted to know why they were working here, but ultimately decided against it.

"Do you really think Leo would be a good waiter?"

"He should at least know how to control himself....."

Tatsuya tried to subtly defend his friend, but Erika's laughing expression didn't falter.

"Mizuki said she didn't like this uniform, maybe she's like Miki in this regard?"

"My name is Mikihiko!"

"Yeah, yeah, yeah~"

Rather peeved, Mikihiko voiced his protest, to which Erika casually agreed before turning back to Tatsuya.

"Owing to these reasons, the two of them are working behind the scenes. Leo is doing manual labor in the kitchen and Mizuki is in charge of the dishes."

Tatsuya didn't know "which reasons" those were, but was able to follow Erika's meaning. Probably.

"Because both of them are good with machinery."

"Yeah, their appearances are very deceiving."

In the modern age, no matter if it was dock work or dish washing, manpower was very rarely directly applied.

Including all the details, machines could replace all manual labor.

Simply put, the two of them were responsible for operating the automatic systems in the kitchen.

"I was originally on support as well, so why did you call me out here?"

Possibly because Mikihiko was unlike Tatsuya in this regard, as the person in question he was unable to understand why and also unwilling to accept as well.

"Didn't I explain many times that it must've been a clerical error?"

"That's not an explanation!"

"OK, OK, stop fussing. We're only interns, but we're still on the clock. Look, the tray over there is empty."

"......Erika, I'll get you for this later."

Mikihiko left that behind as he walked over to the tables, but in Tatsuya's ears, those words weren't "serious" at all.

"Plainly, it was Mikihiko who forgot in the first place....."

Erika grudgingly said this as she watched him leave, but it was hard to decipher her mood based on her voice and expression.

Yet, Tatsuya believed those weren't Erika's true feelings.

"......I don't know if there are any ulterior motives, but shouldn't you go easier on him?"

Erika didn't seem to comprehend Tatsuya's meaning, so she took a while to respond.

"......There isn't any real ulterior motive. But you're right, I am being a little spiteful. I knew that Miki wasn't good in this type of situation, but I still....."

"Wanted to annoy him?"

"Hm~ I guess? He beats around the bush too much, which irritates me whenever I see him like that. Now I can understand why he can't smile openly, but I cannot acknowledge why he refuses to get angry..... That is being stubborn to the extent of four-legged animals."

"How kind of you."

"Please stop."

Tatsuya was simply sympathizing with her words without any other intentions, but was taken aback by Erika's unexpectedly fierce reaction.

"Didn't I just say I was being a little spiteful? Miki and I aren't here of our own volition, we're forced to be here by our elders. Even if I look like I'm being kind, in reality we're just in the same boat."

Her stubborn attitude was undoubtedly born of an obstinate heart.

"......I'll skip the details. Not like I can do anything with the answers anyways, so I'll just pretend I didn't hear that."

Tatsuya wasn't about to step into that minefield yet.

"Sorry, just don't ask..... By the way, Tatsuya-kun."

Erika didn't hold it against Tatsuya for not comforting her.

"What is it?"

"Tatsuya-kun..... is very detached."

Her tone and words were complete opposites of one another and were not critical in the slightest.

"......That was quite the abrupt change in topic."

"But, I'm very thankful that you're so detached..... I think. You're not too gentle, so I can safely vent all I want. Nor do you pity me, so I don't feel embarrassed..... Thank you."

The last two words were so quiet that they almost couldn't be heard.

Seeing Erika flee towards the nearby tables, Tatsuya thought: everyone has their own troubles.

For a buffet with no designated seating for upwards of 400 people, the cuisines could not be set in one central location. The buffet sprawled over the entire ballroom of the hotel's top floor, with three tables set by the two walls and in the center in the front, middle, and rear for a total of 9 tables. Cuisines suitable for teenagers were constantly being replenished on the serving tables.

Historically, the students from each school usually congregated around one of the tables.

That being said, only small fry (?) were able to focus on eating, but the brass from each school weren't so relaxed.

At Mayumi's signal, Miyuki bid farewell to her peers and moved with the Student Council.

As Mayumi and Suzune were greeting the leadership from the other schools — and engaged in ruthless spying, Miyuki was carefully scrutinizing her brother, who was watching Erika, from behind them.

She didn't make any noise or reveal any expression, but inwardly sighed.

Miyuki esteemed Tatsuya more than anyone else (not only did Miyuki respect Tatsuya more than anyone else, she also rated him higher than anyone else).

She knew her brother wasn't perfect — but still believed that her brother was, on some level, superhuman.

Miyuki also knew that her brother possessed many glaring flaws.

One of these flaws was that he was unable to believe other people's good will towards him.

This can be partially blamed on his dullness, in that he was unable to comprehend goodwill directed towards him.

More importantly, Tatsuya honestly questioned why people would think positively of him.

On some level, this was inevitable.

Because his own parents neglected to pour this emotion called "love" into him, and even personally stripped "love" from his mind.

Miyuki knew it would take a miracle for her brother to return her feelings.

Even so, seeing an adorable classmate (even in Miyuki's eyes, Erika was an undeniable beauty) display an almost affectionate — Miyuki believed this might be "love" — towards him, Tatsuya still watched her go, behind that unyielding mask of logic, causing Miyuki's heart to ache more than be at ease.

Miyuki believed that her brother didn't even notice the gaze she was directing towards him.

Or maybe he noticed that she was watching him.

But Tatsuya definitely wasn't able to comprehend what feelings Miyuki was holding inside — once she thought of this, Miyuki despaired.

And grew more furious.

—This way, she must scold him sternly in order to calm down.

—Her brother's overly dim personality would definitely be a stumbling stone on his path to developing meaningful social relations.

—Yes, this was for her brother, a scolding born of love.

Beneath the beatific smile normally seen on statues, Miyuki made this decision.

.....There was no way she could have remained ignorant of the looks she drew from her surroundings, but maybe no one could understand the real her.

Mayumi and company were (on the outside) chatting freely with the Student Council members from Third High, who were likely the stiffest opposition to First High's campaign.

In the rear, the 1st Year students from Third High were whispering to one another.

If they were eavesdropping on their senpais' analysis of combat strength and strategy, then they would be worthy of the militant nature of Third High and even move their upperclassmen to tears, but.....

"Ichijou, look, isn't that girl rad?"

"Who the heck says rad these days..... In which generation did you attend high school?"

"Shut up, I wasn't asking you. So, Ichijou, what do you think?"

"Why are you so excited..... It's no use, that level of beauty is out of your league, so don't bother trying."

"Man, would you quit it, even if I can't, Ichijou should be no problem, right? Because Ichijou's got the looks and brains and is a member of the Ten Master Clans to boot, surely we can get on his coattails, right?"

"I'm amazed you can speak so brazenly with a straight face....."

In reality, they were conversing in this manner — which was very much like regular highschoolers.

"Masaki, what is it?"

However, the male student in the center of the group did not respond to the enthusiastic endorsement and focused all his attention on the female student in question.

Instead of focusing on his charming visage, his handsome aura stood out and perfectly matched the description of a "young and handsome warrior" in the archaic fashion. Standing near 180 cm in height with a thick set of shoulders, compact waist and slender legs..... 1st Year student Ichijou Masaki of Third High was just as his teammates described, a man whose physical appearance was quite popular with the ladies.

".....Masaki?"

Bewildered, Masaki looked towards the person who called his name. The other person was also a male 1st Year student from Third High whose build was well-trained but not overly tall.

"......George, do you know who she is?"

"George" was a nickname, as his outer appearance was thoroughly Asian and his real name Kichijouji Shinkurou was purely Japanese. Upon hearing Masaki's question, this student immediately replied without further consideration.

"Hm? Oh, I think you can tell from the uniform, she's a 1st Year student from First High. Her name is Shiba Miyuki, and she's participating in 'Icicle Destruction' and 'Fairy Dance', so she must be the 1st Year ace from First High."

"Whew, so both talented and beautiful, eh?"

Ichijou Masaki ignored his teammate who was bending back in a comical fashion and muttered to himself.

"Shiba Miyuki, eh....."

This sound caused the male student known as George to turn a curious eye on Masaki.

"It's quite rare for Masaki to show interest in the ladies, isn't it?"

The other students expressed their agreement.

"Now that you mention it, that's quite right."

"With Ichijou's merits, usually the ladies approach him directly, so he's usually not the pursuing one, right?"

"You have no idea how many people are jealous of this fellow."

This surrounding environment gradually turned into one where "single men were starting to get angry", but Masaki remained silent.

He would continue to observe Miyuki during several unobtrusive intervals.

His gaze possessed considerable warmth.

As the VIPs began speaking, the high school students that were the focal point of the day stopped what they were doing and paid overly serious attention to the adults speaking — or pretended to do so at any rate.

After Erika returned to her station, Tatsuya had no one left to speak with and finally obtained a modicum of peace.

Just taking in the famous figures from the magic community was a sufficient way to spend the time.

Some he beheld for the first time, others had only been seen on TV.

Of course, there were also people he had met before or sat with in the same room, but not conversed with.

Among these people, the one who held most of Tatsuya's interest was the elder from the Ten Master Clans known as the "Patriarch".

Kudou Retsu.

He was one of the most important figures from the Ten Master Clans in the 21st century and, until around twenty years ago, was acknowledged to be one of the strongest Magicians in the world.

After this elder, once renowned as one of the strongest, retired from the front lines, he rarely appeared in public events but for some reason chose to appear every year at the Nine Schools Competition. This detail was public knowledge.

Likewise, Tatsuya had never met this man, but had seen him on video.

In his heart, Tatsuya discovered an excitement akin to witnessing a historical figure striding into the light.

After the various VIPs finished encouraging or lecturing the crowd, it was finally Elder Kudou's turn.

He must be over 90 years old now.

How much of that once astonishing Magic Power still remained?

Did he possess a physical body still capable of wielding magic?

As Tatsuya considered this, the master of ceremonies formally introduced the elder's name.

Not just Tatsuya, every high school student held their breath as they waited for Elder Kudou to take the stage.

The appearance of this famous figure made Tatsuya forget to breathe out.

The person who appeared beneath the congregated lights was a young, blonde woman wearing a formal gown.

This immediately threw the audience into an uproar.

Tatsuya was not the only one shocked by this.

This incredibly unexpected turnout caused discussions to break out throughout the audience.

Wasn't Elder Kudou supposed to take the stage?

Why was a young woman appearing in his place?

Did something happen, forcing her to speak in his place?

(—No, that's not it.)

Tatsuya finally realized the truth.

The woman wasn't the only person on stage.

An elderly man stood behind her.

Everyone's attention was only drawn towards the outwardly captivating young lady.

(—Sensory Interference Magic.)

The elder likely invoked a large scale magic that covered the entire meeting place.

By using an obvious distraction to capture everyone's attention, this sort of "change" doesn't qualify as phenomenon rewriting, as it was a "phenomenon" that occurred naturally.

The magic's scale was large enough to impact everyone present at the same time, yet subtle enough to escape detection.

(So this was the man once called the strongest..... No, the "Sly Warlock" hailed as the "pinnacle" and "craftiest" — the magic of Kudou Retsu.....)

He must have noticed Tatsuya's gaze.

The elder behind the young woman cracked a smile.

A smile that would not be out of place on a mischievous young man.

The woman in the formal gown stepped aside after receiving the elder's quiet instructions.

As the spotlight fell upon the elder, a huge commotion spread throughout the crowd.

Almost everyone believed Elder Kudou materialized out of thin air.

The elder's eyes once more locked onto Tatsuya.

Tatsuya subtly returned the greeting with his eyes.

The elder's eyes displayed a very satisfied smile.

"First of all, allow me to express my sincere apologies for creating this subterfuge."

Even discounting the microphone's presence, his voice remained loud and clear — in definite contrast to his advanced age.

"This was just a small sideshow that was more like a magic trick than true magic, but based on my observations, only five people detected the truth behind the facade. In other words....."

Many high school students were deeply drawn into the elder's words and intent behind his words.

"If I was a terrorist planning to destroy you all and smuggled chemical weapons or explosives under the guise of a visitor, only five people would be able to reach out and deny me. That's just how it is."

The elder's words did not possess any particular emphasis or reprimand.

However, a different sort of stillness enveloped the meeting area.

"To our youth studying magic.

Magic is a means, magic itself is not the end goal.

I created this little game hoping to remind everyone of this very point.

The magic I just used was on a large scale, but low in strength.

By Magic Power standards, this belongs to lower level magic.

Yet, everyone succumbed to this weak magic and could not discover my presence, despite knowing that I would appear.

It is vital that you continue to train in magic.

You must diligently raise your Magic Power without relent.

Still, just this is insufficient. I pray that everyone here carves that into their hearts.

An inappropriately used large magic cannot compare to a meticulously prepared and executed small magic.

Remember, everyone, the Nine Schools Competition that begins two days from now is a battlefield that is fought with magic, as well as a battlefield where the use of magic is equally important.

To our youth studying magic.

I highly anticipate what brilliant schemes you will display in this competition."

The audience burst into applause.

Unfortunately, this applause didn't spread throughout the audience.

Among the bemused but clapping teenagers, Tatsuya was also applauding. Except, he differed from other youths in that he wore a quiet smile.

To propose that the use of magic was more important than the level of magic ran counter to everything the upper strata of modern magic society was espousing. The value of magic comes from its proper use, which hinted that magic should only be seen as an independent tool.

This old Magician stood near the pinnacle of magical society within the country, but still advised everyone to go against the norms established by modern magic society. From another perspective, this attitude was very irresponsible, because his influence was enough to shake the foundations of modern magic society.

If Kudou Retsu's speech was only empty words, Tatsuya would have balked, yet this elder used a simple and easy to understand method to demonstrate his point. He used a superlative technique far beyond Tatsuya's means to use magic as a flexible and agile tool.

—So this is the "Patriarch".....

Kokonoe Yakumo, Kazama Harunobu, as well as this Kudou Retsu, this country still contained many Magicians that Tatsuya needed to learn from. Surely there were many other subjects worthy of study, except Tatsuya didn't know of them yet. This was something he couldn't learn in the FLT research labs.

And he thought high school would be boring.

Tatsuya ruminated on this at the same time.

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The banquet was held two days before the main event to preserve one day for the contestants to properly rest and relax.

The technician team and the tactical advisors were busy with the final leg of the preparations, just as the contestants were using their own methods to mentally and physically prepare themselves for the start of the competition tomorrow.

That being said, the 1st Year students would compete on the fourth day of the event, so at this stage excitement and resounding feelings far outweighed anxiety. From an age perspective, they were the ones who usually departed on trips with their peers.

After dinner, Miyuki, Honoka, and Shizuku also visited Tatsuya's room, but since Tatsuya was engaged in adjusting the Activation Sequences, they quickly called it a night and returned to their own rooms. The itinerary for the Official and Newcomers Divisions differed, so two 1st Year students usually shared a room. Honoka and Shizuku were roommates, while Miyuki shared a room with a young lady named Takigawa Kazumi from Class C. However, since Kazumi's personality was geared towards athletic club activities and she usually spent her days with the senpais from her club, Miyuki spent most of her time with Honoka and Shizuku in their room.

The hour hand on the clock (for some reason, all the clocks in the hotel were this type) pointed towards the Roman numeral "X", and the majority of the high school contestants who were waiting for tomorrow to begin had already turned in. Precisely because they understood this, not just Miyuki

and company, but all their teammates and 1st Year students from the other schools knew to remain quiet and not cause a ruckus. Even so, their overabundant energies rendered them unable to sleep peacefully like their older peers.

The only thing that three girls would do while burning the midnight oil would be talking to one another.

There are of course exceptions to this rule. From outward appearances, Miyuki and Shizuku should belong to the "exceptions" category, but were unexpectedly "ordinary".

The recent topics were all related to the Nine Schools Competition, and not all girl talk revolved around fashion and romance, but since these topics frequently cut into the conversation, it was all but inevitable.

As mentioned earlier, the time was approaching 10 o'clock, but it wasn't lights out in the hotel yet. Hence why when someone knocked on the door, there was no cause for alarm or suspicion.

"Ah, I'll get that."

The knocking caused all three to rise and Honoka, who was closest to the door, halted the other two.

"Good evening!"

"Hey, Eimi, everyone, what's up?"

The person behind the door was a captivating petite girl with red hair that shone with a ruby-like luster. She was Akechi Eimi, one of Miyuki's teammates, with four other students behind her. In other words, First High's Newcomers Division Women's Team was almost all gathered here.

"Uh, you know, there's an onsen here."

"......Sorry, you need to speak plainly."

Honoka didn't understand why Eimi was so happy as she said this.

"Now that you mention it, this hotel has an artificial onsen beneath it."

But Miyuki quickly grasped Eimi's meaning.

"Yes, as expected of Miyuki, you're brilliant!"

"......I'm sorry, but hearing you say that hardly fills me with joy."

Eimi meant no harm, but after being praised so leisurely (?), Miyuki felt a headache oncoming.

As Miyuki pressed her temple, Eimi made an "Eh?" expression as she tilted her head to one side.

"It's nothing, don't worry about it. So what about this onsen?"

At Miyuki's urging, Eimi broke into an innocent smile.

"So, let's go to the onsen!"

Eimi's sudden — at least in Miyuki's ears — words caused Miyuki and Honoka to glance at one another.

Honoka seemed to share Miyuki's misgivings.

"Is that OK? This is a military facility."

Yet, the person who represented the three of them and asked Eimi was Shizuku situated in the rear.

This wasn't an ordinary hotel — it was one of the facilities attached to the SDF's exercise grounds. Besides the facilities arranged ahead of time, most of the other areas should have restricted access.

"I tried asking for permission and received it. We're OK until 11."

Eimi easily alleviated Shizuku's concerns.

"As expected of Eimi."

Honoka couldn't refrain from saying softly.

"You should say, thanks for the opportunity, right!"

Alas, such words had no effect on the ecstatic Eimi.

"Wait, I remember that swimsuits are required in the onsen. I didn't bring one."

"That's also no problem, as the hotel will lend us bathing robes as well as towels."

Eimi easily fielded Miyuki's practical concerns.

Given this level of preparation, Miyuki and company had no further reasons to refuse. Honestly, all three of them were slightly interested in the — albeit artificial — onsen.

"Then allow us to accompany you. Let me get some clothes, you guys go ahead."

Hearing Miyuki's reply, Eimi nodded happily.

"OK, take your time, no need to hurry."

Miyuki lightly raised a hand and temporarily bid adieu to her teammates.

The underground bathhouse (artificial onsen) was completely monopolized by First High's female 1st Year students.

It's not like they reserved the entire area, more like there weren't any other guests, so they were in complete control from 10 to 11.

The large bathhouse was similar to public bathhouses in that they were intended for similar purposes.

However, while this underground artificial onsen was called a large bathhouse, in reality it could only hold 10 people or so. The onsen was originally designed to help treat muscle and joint pain from extensive exercise and heated the salty reisen that ran beneath the hotel to form this medical facility. The primary users were usually higher ranking officers (and middle-aged to boot), and it was never intended to be open to the public. Owing to the fact that only those under the doctor's orders could visit during specified hours, anyone entering had to rinse themselves off in the shower area and don a swimsuit or bathing robe before entering.

—Besides their group, no other group appeared to have applied for permission.

Female bathing robes were literally "mini-coats that reached mid-thigh without any pants". Though maybe describing them as "bathing robes the length of mini-skirts without the belt" sounded sexier? The lack of a belt certainly made it easier to relax in the onsen, but provided even less sense of security than a swimsuit.

"Wow....."

"W.....What is it?"

Anyone wearing this would undoubtedly be too ashamed to appear before anyone of the opposite gender, but everyone here was a girl and trustworthy teammates on top of that. However, at Eimi's explosive breath, Honoka was overcome by a sense of shame and alertness as if a man had seen her.

She couldn't help but wrap her arms tightly around the front of her robe.

Eimi's eyes were glued in that direction — Honoka's bosom.

"How surprising, Honoka cuts a great figure!"

Eimi gradually advanced.

Honoka kept retreating.

Her back quickly encountered the wall of the bathing area.

"Honoka."

"What is it?"

The predatory aura that swirled around Eimi was almost enough to make Honoka scream.

"Can I take a look?"

"Of course not!"

Eimi's eyes were laughing, so she was obviously messing around. The question was how far she would take the joke.

Honoka quickly glanced around the bathing area for help. Her teammates were either relaxing in the onsen or sitting on the edge soaking their feet. Everyone around her had the same smiling eyes Eimi did, with one exception.

"What's the matter, after all, Honoka's bust is huge."

"Is that the problem here!"

Eimi's eyes remained smiling, but Honoka could see something lurking in her eyes that told her this wouldn't end in a joking manner.

"Shizuku, save me!"

Honoka couldn't help but appeal for help from Shizuku, "the one exception".

Shizuku slowly rose.

"So what?"

After saying this, she left the bathing area.

"What!"

At her best friend's betrayal, Honoka screamed in pain.

Instantly, Shizuku lowered a sorrowful gaze towards her own chest.

"After all, Honoka's bust is huge."

After leaving these incriminating words, she turned and headed into the sauna.

The bathing area was filled with Honoka's shrieks.

(What are they fighting over now?)

Miyuki could not comprehend what was causing the sounds of water splashing everywhere in the bathing area as she continued to shower. She had already washed off the sweat and dust of the day, but still went through the motions and activated the "Personal Washer" in the shower to thoroughly rinse herself off (from the collar down) before putting on her bathing robe. She wrapped a towel around her silky hair to hold it in place and finally padded into the bathing area that finally quieted down. At this moment, every teammate in the area locked their gaze on Miyuki's figure.

"W.....What's wrong?"

Miyuki shrank back as she came to a halt, but no one replied.

The number of looks never changed.

"Everyone, stop, Miyuki is straight!"

For some reason, Honoka said this in a solemn and stirring voice, which shattered the unnatural silence.

"Honoka?"

Honoka's words were too vague for Miyuki to comprehend its meaning.

"Ah~ Sorry, sorry, accidentally lost track of myself."

Sitting in the innermost corner by the edge of bath was a young lady from Class D named Satomi Subaru who spoke in a gentlemanly tone that would not seem out of place on a young man. This allowed Miyuki to finally make the connection regarding what Honoka was talking about and also understand exactly what the looks directed her way signified.

"Hold on..... We're all girls here, what are you talking about?"

Miyuki frantically said and tugged her robe towards the inside of her thighs. This movement actually once more ignited the tense atmosphere within the bathhouse.

The moisture left over from the shower interacted with the steam let off by the onsen, causing the thin fabric to cling tightly to the body, revealing Miyuki's feminine curves as well as the vibrant twin orbs on her chest.

The front collar revealed flesh that was dyed to a faint pink.

Extending beneath the short hem of the robes was a pair of impeccable, dazzling, and beautiful legs.

Especially in Miyuki's condition, even compared to being completely unclothed, even in a bathing robe that was far less revealing than her swimsuit, this brewed an irresistibly lovable charisma.

".....Are all girls, yeah, I understand, but....."

"I don't know how to say this..... But if it's Miyuki that's OK."

Everyone whispered in profound agreement.

"That's enough! Now you're just going too far."

Even at this disadvantage, Miyuki bravely strode into the bath.

She gracefully sank into bath and stretched out her legs under everyone's unblinking gaze.

As she lowered herself to a sitting position, the water reached neck height. The front collar swayed to the movement of the water and, for an instant, Miyuki's nape was revealed.

Somewhere, a collective gasp could be heard.

This awkward atmosphere was neither joking nor was it intended to cause a scene.

If this continues, Miyuki's chastity might be in danger.

"Miyuki, I'm with you!"

Fortunately, Honoka splashed down beside Miyuki, disrupting the spider's web that was closing around the butterfly.

"If you don't stop now, everyone here runs the risk of bathing in frigid water!"

Upon hearing this threat, all their teammates finally adopted serious expressions and turned away from watching Miyuki.

Even with their eyes elsewhere, they were still consciously drawn to Miyuki.

Plainly, there were many young girls present, but no one ventured to speak.

On the other hand, Miyuki wanted to protest to Honoka's words, but felt that rashly proclaiming that "she definitely wouldn't do anything like that" may be a dangerous move that would upset the delicate balance, so she refrained.

"......What happened?"

Shizuku, who had hitherto been staying in the sauna by herself, asked innocently as she beheld the awkward atmosphere in the bathhouse.

Likely self-reflecting after someone finally asked, the young ladies returned to normal.

Once the young girls adopted their regular behavior, the bathhouse was once again filled with the sounds of talk and laughter.

The subjects that girls talk about are more than just fashion and romance.

Still, fashion and romance were truly two of the most popular subjects.

While soaking in the bath, the conversation naturally turned to the males they met during the previous night's banquet. The primary target were "boys", but included some "men" and a small group of "older men". This sounds like the breath of their admiration spanned a large spectrum, but honestly that was how it was:

"—So, the bartender behind the counter was quite an interesting old timer."

"Whoa..... That guy's totally over 40. To think that you're interested in middle-aged men, I think your life is over....."

"Correction, please say interesting gentleman. In my eyes, high school students are all immature kids that are completely undependable."

"Really~? I don't think all the boys our age are like that, maybe because you've been seeing the wrong people?"

"Yeah, Isori-senpai looks pretty tolerant, right? More importantly, he looks like a decent guy."

"I feel kind of empty going after someone with a girlfriend already, you know? Also in Isori-senpai's case, his girlfriend has already advanced to fiancée."

"Speaking of dependable, I guess that has to be Juumonji-senpai?"

"Nah, Juumonji-senpai is too dependable. Not only that, he's also the Ten Master Clans' future successor."

"Speaking of successors of the Ten Master Clans, there's the successor for the Ichijou Family from Third High, right?"

"Ah, I saw him, he's pretty hot."

"Yeah, I know you shouldn't judge boys by outward appearances, but it certainly doesn't hurt if he is easy on the eyes."

.....Just like that.

All of a sudden, Eimi suddenly thrust the conversation back to Miyuki, who was sitting in the corner of the bath letting the (mental) exhaustion soak out of her.

"Speaking of Ichijou from Third High, he was watching Miyuki with burning eyes."

Eimi was speaking to Miyuki, but Miyuki was unable to respond to these words.

"Eh, really?"

"Maybe it was love at first sight?"

"This is Miyuki we're talking about, it's highly possible."

"You should say that it would be strange for boys not to fall in love with Miyuki at first sight, right?"

"Maybe they knew each other from long ago."

Everyone listening let out delighted shrieks.

"Miyuki, is that true?"

Shizuku didn't join the shrieking and adopted a serious tone — Shizuku's tone lacked the normal voice inflection, so even if she personally didn't intend to, she still came across as being solemn — as she asked Miyuki.

Miyuki's response was:

"......Allow me to be perfectly clear, I've only seen Ichijou-kun in pictures and didn't even know where he was located during the banquet."

This might qualify as being callous or sheer overkill, and if Third High had heard Miyuki's response, morale probably would have plummeted. The young girls bursting with expectations were all taken aback upon hearing this answer.

Even so, there were always people who refused to surrender.

"If that's the case, what type of guy does Miyuki like? Is it truly like your brother's type?"

The one who reacted to Subaru's words was not Miyuki, but Honoka instead. Her body tensed momentarily, which was only detected by Shizuku who was sitting beside her.

Miyuki displayed an incredibly calm attitude and an almost wordless expression as she answered Subaru.

"I have no idea where you think this is going..... But Onii-sama and I are siblings by blood, so I've never seen Onii-sama as a romantic partner. Also, I don't believe there's anyone else in the entire world that could be the same as Onii-sama."

Hearing Miyuki's reply, Subaru and Eimi were distinctly disappointed (Subaru's expression looked a little forced).

Afterwards, no one else questioned Miyuki and Tatsuya's relationship.

Yet, within the bath, two girls did not fully accept Miyuki's answer.

In Miyuki's tone, Honoka and Shizuku read something entirely different from the words "I've never seen Onii-sama as a romantic partner".

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After Tatsuya dispatched Miyuki and company back to their rooms — though he became the subject of their conversations with their teammates in the underground onsen — he continued adjusting the Activation Sequences in the storage vehicles.

"Shiba-kun, it's about time to call it a night."

Hearing these words, Tatsuya glanced around to find only one other person in the vehicle with him.

"It's that late already?"

The time was roughly midnight.

Isori revealed a gender neutral smile and nodded at Tatsuya's words (By the way, Isori's wardrobe and hairstyle were both neutral, causing Tatsuya to suspect this senpai of his intentionally dressed in a non-masculine manner).

"The participants Shiba-kun is responsible for compete on the 4th day, so I think it's not a good idea to be so tense from the start."

"You're right."

Tatsuya was on duty for the 1st Year female students in Speed Shooting, Icicle Destruction, and Mirage Bat. This was partially born of Miyuki and company's wishes, but also because of the 1st Year male students (especially Morisaki) stonewalling him in defiance (Miyuki was participating in Icicle Destruction and Mirage Bat, Honoka in Battle Board and Mirage Bat, and Shizuku in Speed Shooting and Icicle Destruction).

The 1st Year Division — the Newcomers Division was set between the 4th and 8th days of the contest.

Compared to the auxiliaries in charge of the participants competing tomorrow, Tatsuya had considerably more time on his hands.

Kanon was set to participate in Icicle Destruction on the 2nd and 3rd days, but Isori was in charge of participants appearing on stage tomorrow.

"Then, senpai, I'm taking my leave."

Tatsuya intentionally avoided inviting Isori to also call it quits and left the storage vehicle by himself.

Despite being near midnight, evenings in the height of summer did not have a noticeably lower temperature.

Perfect for taking a stroll in T-shirts.

Tatsuya opted not to head directly back to his room and strolled around the perimeter of the hotel, where he detected an oddly nervous presence.

This presence told him that someone was holding his breath while surveying the premises.

Initially, Tatsuya thought this was a thief, but quickly rejected this line of thinking.

A presence that desired to hide itself but was unable to, reeked of bloodthirsty impulses.

Tatsuya spread out his senses and directly linked to the information dimension — the colossal information body that contained the data for the myriad objects around him.

(Three people in total, located near..... The railings near the hotel camouflaged to look like foliage.)

Each of them carried handguns and small explosives.

Even if they were in the outer periphery of the hotel, they were well within areas under military jurisdiction, and the security around the base definitely wasn't that relaxed. Pickets and cameras would monitor the entrances and immediately deny all infiltrators and were especially merciless toward armed and dangerous individuals.

These guys were malefactors who had penetrated the security perimeter and had even prepared explosives.

Despite not having a CAD on hand, they were too dangerous to be ignored.

Tatsuya soundlessly began to sprint.

His senses captured an ally that was also rapidly approaching the three suspicious individuals.

His sneaking skills were not inferior to Tatsuya's own.

According to their starting positions, even though the two of them were approaching the targets at similar velocity — Mikihiko was going to make contact first.

As Tatsuya sprinted forward, he also began constructing support magics.

His Magic Power was so specialized that he could only use certain magics and, even without a CAD, as long as he was using those magics, he was equal to any other Magician using a CAD in terms of speed, detail and strength.

Mikihiko began invoking his magic.

He wasn't using a CAD.

The data provided through the information dimension told Tatsuya that this wasn't an illusion, it was a concept.

Mikihiko pulled out three fortune tellers — probably meant to be charms.

Mikihiko wasn't planning on using modern magic, he was using Ancient Magic.

Before Tatsuya "knew" this, psions flew through Tatsuya's hands into the developing technique.

Modern magic and Ancient Magic were grounded in the same fundamental theory, which is using interference with the "data" attached to an "existence" and taking one step further to rewrite the "phenomenon".

The difference lay in how the interference worked and was expressed.

The magic system that Mikihiko used did not construct the interfering information body (the Magic Sequence) in the Magic Calculation Area, but split this into three steps: add data into the charm in his hand to turn it into

a medium, float the now disconnected "material" into the information dimension to morph it into "independent, non-material information body" and control it, then try to rewrite the phenomenon.

Compared to the ability of information bodies that can directly interact with phenomena, such as information bodies from modern magic, this system possessed inferior speed and flexibility, but was less susceptible to resistance to phenomenon-rewriting. If this was phenomenon rewriting within certain parameters, Ancient Magic could accomplish large scale effects while using less power than modern magic.

For Tatsuya, who could dissect Magic Sequences in an instant, all of these details flashed across his mind in a short instant.

He also noticed a trace of distress within Mikihiko's technique.

(He's not going to make it.)

The magic Mikihiko was using had too many unnecessary hurdles, lengthening the casting time to intolerable degrees.

Tatsuya set the target for "dissolution" as the handgun in the miscreants' hands.

The reason Mikihiko detected the perilous presence was because he was in the middle of magic training.

This was one of the deepest corners in the hotel gardens.

Far from any buildings, he found a location in the area surrounding the hotel where no one would come snooping to begin his daily "training".

"Spirits" are an assemblage formed from "concepts" such as "wind, water, fire, earth" and are far removed from individual phenomena. The basic training from Divine Earth Magic (Spirit Magic) is to synchronize oneself with the spirits' senses.

From modern magic's perspective, spirits are things that have broken away from their actual bodies and are information bodies floating in an ocean of data.

They move about as a concept in the information world, assemble together as a conceptual expression, and materialize in the actual world.

Rumors say there is a way to detect these "non-material bodies".

Still, through contact with these types of "spirits", Mikihiko truly felt that they "existed" in the actual world.

This was not grounded in theory, but through his perception and feelings.

For Mikihiko, spirits truly existed in this location and were existences that possessed consciousness. With this type of contact, spirits were able to inform Mikihiko about all sorts of "details" and "objects".

Just as Mikihiko started this synchronization training, he "learned" that there were people on the outskirts of the hotel.

Originally, he thought they were people out on business or patrolling soldiers, so he didn't pay much attention.

It was only after the spirits repeatedly notified him that Mikihiko realized this might be a warning.

Synchronized with the spirits, he spread the spirits' senses towards the direction they warned him.

What he caught was a thread of "malice".

Mikihiko's expression tightened.

For a moment, he debated whether he should call for backup or engage by himself.

Mikihiko wasn't confident he could suppress any opponent in his current state. He was reluctant to admit it, but it was true that he wasn't confident. Thus, he bit his lip and elected to return to the hotel and call it in.

However, his emotions protested this logical choice.

Something other than logic told him that there wasn't enough time.

The agitation surging through his body was like the spirits warning him to "act quickly".

Rather than head towards the hotel, Mikihiko charged towards the "malice".

He was worried.

He questioned whether he was able to overcome the firearms the opponents were carrying.

Very few Magicians were able to triumph over firearms in extreme close quarters combat.

If there was cover, magic that was unaffected by line of sight or obstacles had the advantage.

In situations where cover was not available, Magicians had a hard time countering the speed at which a trigger could be pulled.

Still, Mikihiko expelled these concerns as cowardice and forged ahead.

Yesterday's events flashed across his mind.

Mikihiko was forced to work as a servant under his father's orders.

Erika said this was due to a clerical error, but Mikihiko knew the truth behind the matter.

—Go and behold where you should be standing.

Two nights ago, his father said that to him.

Working as a servant was only a method to get to his objective.

Maybe Mikihiko's father wanted him to see his peers in glory to shock him out of his current state.

Maybe his father wanted to arouse an angry determination.

Yet, these words and methods only lodged themselves deep in Mikihiko's soul as overwhelming humiliation.

At this time, Mikihiko wanted to demonstrate that "he wasn't powerless".

The location was a night sky illuminated by a few sparse stars, but the Yoshida Family's training methods included nocturnal training in pitch darkness.

Even relying only on star light, this was no obstacle whatsoever.

As he closed in on the sense of malice that could now readily be identified as human, Mikihiko prepared his talismans.

Three targets required three talismans.

His targets should have already noticed Mikihiko's approach.

The enmity and malice directed towards Mikihiko verified that these three were the malefactors.

No time to hesitate.

Enmity had already turned into killing intent.

Hesitation would lead to failure.

The targets' identification were not first priority.

Mikihiko channeled magic power into the talismans and started invoking his magic.

A flashing light appeared in Mikihiko's right hand, which twinkled in time with the electricity formed above the malefactors' heads.

Lightning would strike them in less than a second.

Still, it took less than one second to pull the trigger.

Seeing this, Tatsuya immediately made the call and invoked the prepared "dissolution" magic.

The three handguns in the three malefactors' hands fell apart according to the change in their information bodies.

Immediately afterwards—

The miniature lightning strike threw down all three of the targets.

"Who is it!"

Mikihiko demanded in a stern voice, not towards the enemies currently lying on the other side of the railing, but to the Magician who came to his aid from behind.

Mikihiko understood perfectly.

His magic wasn't going to make it in time.

The reason he was uninjured was because another Magician offered his aid.

This skirmish forced him to concede that his magic had lost its former alacrity.

"It's me."

"Tatsuya?"

From Mikihiko's breath alone, one could tell that he suffered a terrible blow.

However, Tatsuya only made a brief response and didn't stop before vaulting onto the railing.

Using personal Weight Magic to lessen the gravitational pull, he easily flipped over the two meter tall railing.

Mikihiko blankly watched him leave before recovering himself and pulling out a new talisman and executed the same Weight Magic.

When Mikihiko landed on the far side of the railing, Tatsuya was already kneeling down next to the fallen intruders.

"Tatsuya?"

This word contained several intermixed questions.

Even Mikihiko himself wasn't sure what he wanted to ask.

"They're not dead. Well done."

Tatsuya appeared to be answering his question regarding the intruders' status, or he may have seen through Mikihiko's state of panic and elected to answer in the least confusing manner.

"Ah?"

Mikihiko didn't understand why Tatsuya was praising him.

He masochistically thought that he should be the one who was taken out.

"Limited visibility on the targets, precision large ranged attack on multiple targets, even with capture as first priority, no fatal injuries were inflicted and only one blow was sufficient to deprive mobility. I say this rates as an excellent combat result."

Tatsuya's words were calm enough to be called callous, but just hearing them alone was enough to know that he was just being polite or comforting.

The one Mikihiko couldn't believe was himself, not Tatsuya.

"......But my magic originally wasn't going to make it in time and, without Tatsuya's backup, I would have been shot."

The words sprouted from Mikihiko's mouth were self-derisively beyond his own control.

"How foolish."

"......Ah?"

However, Tatsuya's direct reprimand was enough to render Mikihiko unable to continue berating himself.

"'If there was no backup' is only an assumption. Your magic was successfully able to capture the intruders — that is the only truth."

"....."

Tatsuya's merciless scolding and subsequent points astounded Mikihiko.

"In reality, I did provide support, and your magic was successful, so what do you mean 'originally'? Mikihiko, what exactly did you think was going to happen?"

"That....."

"No matter how many opponents there are and how well-trained they are, a Magician should be able to triumph without any backup. I sincerely hope you are not operating under these assumptions?"

Mikihiko suddenly felt like the bottom of his stomach was giving out.

He understood very clearly how ridiculous the "assumptions" that Tatsuya referred to were.

Yet, in the inner depths of his heart, did he never truly stop and consider the assumptions Tatsuya was mentioning?

"Seriously..... I'll intentionally say this again. Mikihiko, you are very foolish."

"Tatsuya....."

"Why do you reject yourself to this level?

Why do you disparage yourself to this level?

What is it that so dissatisfies you?"

".....Even if I tried to explain, Tatsuya, you wouldn't understand. There's no point in talking about it."

"There may be."

Mikihiko reacted by throwing up a high wall and retreating behind it, but Tatsuya's ensuing words smashed the wall to bits.

"Ah.....?"

This time it was Mikihiko's turn to be speechless, while Tatsuya pierced him with a sharp look.

"Mikihiko, you're concerned about the magic activation speed, correct?"

".....You heard that from Erika?"

"No."

".....Then how do you know?"

"Your technique is too verbose."

".....What did you say?"

"My point is, the problem isn't your capability, but the technique itself. This is the underlying reason why you cannot wield magic the way you desire."

"How would you know that!"

Mikihiko roared.

Because he was in a state of panic.

Because he was exasperated.

The technique he uses was a product the Yoshida Family had refined over many years by incorporating the aspects of the traditions in Ancient Magic and the results of modern magic.

After seeing it once or twice, Tatsuya immediately tossed it out as a blemished product, which threw Mikihiko into a rage.

He always rejected this line of thinking as a vain attempt to escape from reality, but after hearing Tatsuya bring up this previously ignored topic, Mikihiko panicked.

"I do know. But you don't need to force yourself to believe me."

Yet, Tatsuya calmly replied to Mikihiko's furious outburst, forcing Mikihiko to respond with an even more wavering statement.

"......What did you say?"

Mikihiko used the same words as he did before, but this time the tone was vastly different.

"I can comprehend any magic design that I can 'see', which allows me to read the details behind any Activation Sequence and to provide an in-depth analysis of the Magic Sequence."

Tatsuya replied with this outrageous answer.

Mikihiko's panic had hit a peak.

He had never heard of a Magician capable of such a feat and, if someone with this unique ability truly exists, then half the mysteries facing modern magic theory would be solved in an instant.

"......Again, you don't need to force yourself to believe me."

Tatsuya repeated his earlier words.

Mikihiko felt like he was telling him "what follows next is your own problem".

"Let's table this topic for now. Ignoring that for the moment, we still need to deal with these guys. I'll keep watch for the moment, could you call security? Or do you want me to go?"

Honestly, with Mikihiko's mental state right now, he was unable to consider whether Tatsuya's "confession" was true or not, so he desperately clung to the life line thrown at him.

"Ah, I'll go."

"Understood, I'll wait here."

Mikihiko once more activated his "Leaping" technique and vanished over the railing.

On the other hand, Tatsuya briefly considered how to restrict the intruders' freedom of movement, and ultimately elected to bury them. He could use "Dissolution" to remove the excess dirt, so he needed to use both "Separate" and "Move" magics. Doing so without a CAD was truly a tiresome task, but just like the earlier "Leaping", Tatsuya had already memorized such a simple Magic Sequence and, as long as he performed them sequentially and not simultaneously, this really didn't pose a problem.

Ironically, this was one advantage gleaned from the artificial virtual Magic Calculation Area currently residing in his consciousness, which was the ability to recall any Magic Sequence stored in his memory.

(I'm a devious man.)

He held onto the victim's perspective, but viewed the byproduct as an efficient tool to use.

Tatsuya smirked at his unprincipled self and prepared to invoke his magic.

—But there appeared to be no need for that.

A familiar presence approached, prompting Tatsuya to cancel his magic.

Shortly after, the other person initiated the conversation.

"Special Lieutenant, your earlier suggestion was truly merciless."

"Major, you heard all that?"

Tatsuya didn't detect Kazama eavesdropping.

Which was honestly not that surprising.

Kazama had studied under Kokonoe Yakumo longer than Tatsuya had and was considered to be Yakumo's second best student. Without linking to the information dimension, Tatsuya found it very difficult to trace Kazama's presence.

Tatsuya saluted in greeting, to which Kazama smirked in response.

"Isn't it rare for the usually completely indifferent Special Lieutenant to do such a thing?"

"Labeling this one 'completely indifferent' is uncalled for."

"Or maybe you sympathize with his plight? That young man shares similar problems as you do."

"This one has long since graduated from that level of concern."

"In other words, you're someone who's been around the block?"

"......Could you deal with these people?"

Kazama revealed a foxy smile as he mercilessly pressed the attack and Tatsuya, who had lost all avenues of retreat, finally managed to change the topic.

"Leave that to me, I'll explain everything to the base CO."

Still, Kazama realized that continuing to pursue this line of questioning served no purpose.

He retracted his smile and solemnly nodded towards Tatsuya.

"Sorry for troubling you."

"No worries, looks like many unexpected things were added to your plate as well."

"True. But I wonder what these guys were trying to do?"

"God knows, handling criminals isn't in our job description..... Yet they are surprisingly capable and proactive. Tatsuya, be wary."

"Yes, thank you for your concern."

"We'll talk in detail tomorrow at noon."

"Yes, sir, then allow this one to depart."

"Yeah, goodbye."

The two of them changed from superior and subordinate to two friendly disciples bidding each other farewell.

Chapter 5

The day after Tatsuya's unplanned nighttime excursion.

The Nine Schools Competition began without further incident.

In the next ten days, the number of spectators alone exceeded 100,000 people. Even though the location was inconvenient, at least 10,000 spectators came every day to watch the contests, and the number of online viewers easily surpassed 100 times this number.

While it couldn't draw the same numbers as popular professional sports games, there was still a large number of people who paid attention to this event. That being said, very few people knew about the details regarding last night's incident.

The participants all possessed first class Magic Power but were still high school students.

The malefactors' attack ended without any meaningful accomplishment, so the military judged that it would not negatively impact the participants. As such, they elected to keep the secret.

Rather than calling the opening ceremony glamorous, an orderly impression was more obvious. The magic contests were gaudy enough in their own right, so there was no need for any additional ceremony to embellish the issue, and neither were there tedious speeches from dignitaries. After the school songs from the nine schools were played in succession, the events officially began.

The curtains were drawn for the next ten days, where men and women each competed in 5 events for the Official Division as well as the 5 events for men and women in the Newcomers Division for a total of 20 events.

The 1st day's events were the preliminaries and elimination rounds for "Speed Shooting" and the preliminaries for "Battle Board".

The difference in scheduling reflected the time needed for each event.

"Onii-sama, the President is about to take the field."

"So our main strength is taking the stage for the first event, though I recall Watanabe-senpai's preliminary round is the third one?"

"Yes."

Tatsuya and company headed towards the Speed Shooting stands to watch Mayumi's event. From the left, the order was Shizuku, Honoka, Tatsuya, and Miyuki. They were not seated in the participants' area in the arena proper, but in the regular audience stands.

"Speed Shooting" involves using magic to destroy flying targets from 30 meters out within a limited period of time. The key lies in how accurate and how fast one could fire magic outwards, hence the name "Speed Shooting".

The contest was divided into two portions.

In the preliminary round, contestants advanced on individual merit based on the number of targets destroyed within five minutes.

The preliminary round simultaneously used four shooting galleries to conduct six contests, with the top eight advancing to the Elite Eight.

Also, only 24 contestants were allowed to participate.

If all nine schools sent three contestants, there would be a total of 27, but three of the nine lost their right to participate due to their performance from the previous year and were only able to dispatch two contestants.

Besides "Monolith Code", all events shared this rule.

After the Elite Eight, the event turned into a duel format.

There were 100 red and 100 white targets in the arena, with the total number of corresponding targets destroyed determining the victor.

"Highly destructive magics can be used during the preliminaries to swiftly destroy a large number of targets in one go, but after the Elite Eight, precision targeting is far more important."

Shizuku nodded at Tatsuya's words, as Shizuku was the only one among them to participate in the Speed Shooting portion of the Newcomers Division.

"Generally speaking, most people use different magics during the preliminary and elimination rounds....."

"But President Saegusa is renowned for using the same magic during these two rounds."

In the middle of Tatsuya's explanation, a young lady behind them cut in.

"Erika."

"Hey, Tatsuya-kun."

"Yo."

"Morning."

"Tatsuya-kun, Miyuki-san, Honoka-san, Shizuku-san, good morning everyone."

Seated behind Tatsuya and company, from right to left, were Leo, Erika, Mizuki, and Mikihiko (but the speaking order was Erika, Leo, Mikihiko, and Mizuki).

The reason why the four of them found these spots was that they were sitting in the back row.

"Aren't there more spots up front?"

"That's because I saw Tatsuya-kun's group sitting here, and it's easier to see everything from the back, right?"

"True."

The stands were built like a series of rising stairs, with the higher levels in the back.

This is an event involving shooting targets at high speed, so the spectators in the front rows have to possess the same eyesight as the contestants.

Even so, the spectators still crowded forward, because—

"Because there are an amazing amount of stupid boys."

Erika disdainfully declared in a way that wasn't altogether joking.

"Looks like there are more than teenager boys mixed in."

Tatsuya replied in a sarcastic tone.

In other words, for this reason, there were no spare seats in the front rows.

"Is this what is called 'Onee-sama~'? How depressing."

"Don't be like that, there might be considerable value up front. Even for someone like me who sees the President on a daily basis, she seems like a completely different person now."

"Whoa! Miyuki, what shall we do? Your Onii-sama has fallen for someone else!"

At Erika's ridiculous words, Tatsuya and Miyuki could only wryly smile.

The subject of their conversation was.....

"The 'Elven Sniper', quite the suitable title."

"The President dislikes the term, so make sure not to bring it up in front of her."

Tatsuya's admonishment caused Honoka to shrug in her neck.

The teenage boys and girls squeezed into the front rows to admire Mayumi, who was waiting in the first shooting gallery for the contest to begin.

Mayumi wore a pair of mufflers over her luminous locks of hair, a pair of transparent goggles, an elastic pair of uniform pants and an upturned tunic that could be easily mistaken for a mini-suit. Paired with a rifle-shaped CAD that was mandatory for all Speed Shooting events, this created the perfect combination of cuteness and heroism as if she was the female lead in an upcoming movie.

"There are actually people who use the President as the subject for doujins....."

Mizuki softly said this probably because this getup jolted something in her memory.

".....That's the first I've heard of that."

However, this came so far out of left field that even Erika was barely able to manage a response in time.

"......Mizuki, exactly under what context did you come by this knowledge? If your 'interests' lie in that direction, I may have to re-examine our friendship."

Looks like Miyuki and Erika were thinking of the same thing. This outwardly serious voice contained roughly 10% earnestness.

"Eh? No, I don't have those kinds of interests!"

Still, Mizuki was undoubtedly the most shaken.

"It's starting."

Mizuki was in a full state of panic at realizing what they were hinting at, but managed to snap out of it and quiet down at Tatsuya's words.

The spectator stands were deathly quiet.

The participants were wearing ear muffs, so no amount of audience noise would affect them, but this was a matter of principle.

The participants raised their slender, elongated rifles that almost looked like cane-shaped competition-use CADs, while their poise and concentration caused the silenced audience to grip the edge of their seats.

The flashing light signaled for them to begin.

Targets flew through the sky accompanied by soft firing sounds.

"They're fast......!"

Were the soft words that burst out of Shizuku referring to the flight velocity of the targets?

—Or was she referring to Mayumi's magic that was busy smashing targets left and right?

Mayumi didn't raise her head and stood stock still with her CAD aimed forward.

This event never relied on using the rifle to shoot bullets, so there was no need to visually line up with the target and the CAD never possessed a muzzle or scope.

Rather than presenting arms, her stance was more akin to drawing a bow.

The targets shot forth at irregular intervals.

A total of a hundred targets in five minutes.

On the average, that was one target every 3 seconds.

Compared to normal shooting, this was a ridiculously fast pace. Complicating the matter was that sometimes multiple targets shot forth within a tight interval and sometimes, five or six would fly out after a 10 second interval.

Mayumi shot down every "individual" target without missing a beat.

The five minute contest was over in the blink of an eye.

"......She was perfect."

Mayumi removed her protective goggles and ear mufflers as she smiled in response to the spectators' applause. Seeing her, Tatsuya murmured as if he could think of nothing else to say.

"She was using sub-sonic bullets formed from ice particles, correct?"

Miyuki asked as she was applauding, prompting Tatsuya to smile and nod.

"Correct, I'm surprised you could tell."

"......That was trivial enough that even I could see that....."

Erika retorted in a huff, causing Tatsuya to chuckle wryly.

"That's true, seeing the same magic a hundred times certainly makes it easier."

Someone averted their eyes in shame (probably because they couldn't see it), but Tatsuya elected to pretend he didn't see them.

"One hundred? She didn't miss once?"

Honoka asked Tatsuya in honest surprise, likely brought about by her direct personality.

"Correct, the amazing aspect is not the speed of magic invocation or number of times activated, but the precision entailed. Even using Sensory Magic at the same time, the individual still needs to use their brain to process the data. I don't know if it's because she's accumulated enough

experience in repeated calculations or is simply that talented..... She is truly worthy of being one of the direct descendants of the Ten Master Clans."

"Did the President use Sensory Magic?"

Mizuki exclaimed in surprise, but the difference was that many people mirrored her expression this time.

"Long Range Visual Systematic Sensory Magic 'Multi-Scope' is not meant to examine non-material bodies or information bodies, but observe a physical object from multiple angles like a visual radar. The President often uses this sort of magic."

Tatsuya's gaze asked "Didn't you notice?" to which Mizuki shook her head.

"During the school assembly, she would use this magic to 'watch' every corner, which is a very rare ability..... Don't you think that this level of shooting is impossible for the naked eye?"

"That's true."

Shizuku immediately replied. During the competition, she was putting herself in Mayumi's shoes and considering her options in the shooting gallery.

"Still, the President is using Speed-Type Magic to turn air molecules into ice particles then applying acceleration to sub-sonic levels and using Sensory Magic at the same time, right? With Sensory Magic running, and then using deceleration and acceleration back and forth a hundred times, the President has amazing Magic Power."

At this point, the "Magic Power" Leo was talking about did not refer to the "Magic Power" from the technical skills assessment, but the more generic context of having the physical capacity of repeatedly casting spells.

A common misunderstanding is that magic is an activity that consumes energy.

Phenomena are not rewritten by burning physical energy, but by editing the data surrounding the phenomena.

In order to edit the data, a Magic Sequence formed from psions is required, so the number of times magic can be invoked is limited by the difference in

the scale of Magic Sequences. The "Magic Power" Leo is talking about here, if likened to an actual concept, would be similar to the mental strain exerted on the body.

"The President is using a variant of 'Hale Particles'. The original 'Hale Particles' is already a highly efficient form of magic and with the President's ability, she could probably cast this 1000 times rather than a paltry 100 times."

Tatsuya's endless praise towards Mayumi elicited complex expressions from Miyuki and the others.

They also acknowledged that Mayumi's Magic Power was incredible, but hearing Tatsuya, who was usually very critical on all things magic, give such unrestrained praise could not help but arouse some jealousy.

On the other hand, Leo was concerned about something else entirely.

"Eh, but to create ice in the heat of summer and then accelerate to subsonic levels should require a lot of power. Even if conservation of energy doesn't wholly apply to magic, I still find it hard to believe Tatsuya's assessment that you can use such a small amount of magic to achieve such a level of phenomena rewriting."

"While it may not wholly apply, that does not mean they are unrelated."

Tatsuya rose and headed towards the "Battle Board" spectator stands while responding with this mysterious answer.

"What do you mean?"

Leo chased after Tatsuya and asked again.

"Magic is a technique that involves changing phenomena and is not limited by conservation of energy. However, the object being rewritten remains bound by the law of conservation of energy. For example, if you apply Speed Magic to an object, without using magic to maintain its condition, the accelerated object will turn cold, since the objects own heat is being converted to energy of motion; if you cast Heat Magic on a speeding object, without using magic to maintain its velocity, then the target object will slow down, since the object's energy of motion is being converted to heat. Generally, magic strives to avoid changing unrelated aspects by adding in measures to maintain the status quo, so there's rarely an opportunity to observe this in action.

The laws of physics are very difficult to circumvent and, even when altered by illogical forces like magic, it will attempt to revert back to a logical outcome. Thus, magic that does not break the law of conservation of energy remains a 'natural' phenomenon and from a magic perspective, it does not require high interference strength.

You should understand by now, right? The magic used to accelerate the ice particles is based on taking the heat that is removed from the frozen particles and converting it into the energy of projectile motion, thus scamming the laws of physics. While this runs counter to the law of entropy and is something that would never occur in nature, it's a more logical explanation than simply constructing ice particles, accelerating the ice particles with magic, then applying thermodynamics."

"......I get the feeling that I've just been conned."

"Leo, magic is an ability used to 'deftly deceive the world', remember that."

"In other words, we Magicians are con artists out to ruin the world?"

"The stronger the Magician, the more likely he's a crook."

Tatsuya was utterly serious as he explained all of this, but at Erika and Shizuku's added commentary, he could only smile in response.

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"Battle Board" was a contest where the participant used a spindle-shaped surf board that was 285 cm long and 51 cm wide to navigate an artificial waterway. The surf board had no propulsion of its own, so the participants needed to use magic to arrive at the finish line. During the course, attacks on other players themselves or their boards were forbidden, but magic was allowed to be cast on the water's surface.

There was no unified set of rules for this event. This contest was originally designed by the navy to train Magicians, so with magic as a prerequisite, it was impossible for this event to be popularized enough to warrant a unified set of rules.

The Battle Board portion of the Nine Schools Competition involved completing three laps around a 3 km long waterway. The waterway

possessed straight courses and sharp turns as well as uphill and waterfall portions.

Men and women each raced on a separate track, but there were no notable differences in difficulty.

The preliminary stage contained six rounds with four contestants each, while the elimination stage contained two rounds with three contestants each, with the four eliminated players competing for third place. The finals were held in a duel format.

The average duration of each round was 15 minutes.

The highest speed may exceed 30 knots — which is roughly 55~60 km per hour. Atop the surf board, the players had no cover against the incoming wind. Unlike other nautical races that could benefit from being downwind, Battle Board was entirely against the wind. Just dealing with the air resistance alone quickly sapped the players' endurance.

"Female contestants usually have a hard time in this event. Honoka, how are you physically?"

"No problems. On Tatsuya-kun's advice, I've been undergoing physical training. After being selected, I've also lengthened my hours of sleep."

Unrelated to the Nine Schools Competition, Tatsuya was concerned about Honoka's physical stamina from the first moment they met and thus advised her to not just undergo magic training, but also physical training as well. Tatsuya merely mentioned this out of hand, but Honoka surprisingly took it to heart.

"Honoka really put on some muscle."

"Ew, Miyuki don't be like that. I don't want to be a female body builder."

Hearing this two-sided conversation, even Tatsuya laughed aloud.

"You see..... Even Tatsuya-kun laughed."

"He's only laughing because Honoka spoke in an odd manner."

"Now even Shizuku is saying so..... Fine, I know when I'm being excluded. I'm not like the two of you — Tatsuya-kun isn't willing to take care of my event."

Honoka's sudden tantrum mystified Tatsuya so much that he couldn't laugh any more.

Exactly why was she gunning for him now?

"......I'm responsible for Honoka's support and maintenance during 'Mirage Bat'."

At any rate, Tatsuya only responded to her literal complaint.

However.....

"So 'Battle Board' isn't included? Plainly, both of Miyuki and Shizuku's events are within Tatsuya-kun's purview....."

This seemed to have achieved the opposite effect.

"......Instead, I've helped you train and strategize, so it's not like I'm excluding you....."

While trying to justify himself, Tatsuya felt himself falling into a sticky predicament and started to stutter.

"Tatsuya-kun, Honoka-san isn't referring to that."

Upon seeing this, Mizuki interrupted, but it didn't sound like she couldn't stand this scene any longer.

"Onii-sama..... I think you're being a little too slow."

Following Mizuki, it was Miyuki's turn.

"We've discovered Tatsuya-kun's unexpected weakness."

And Erika next.

"Blockhead?"

Shizuku also joined in on the attack.

Under siege from the women, Tatsuya was struck speechless. He felt that they were being ridiculously illogical, but at the same time he felt that resistance was futile.

Not that he got any support from the guys.

Until the contest began, Tatsuya could only patiently endure this situation.

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With the waterway ready and the contestants assuming ready positions, Tatsuya finally escaped.

On route, he understood what Miyuki and the others were driving at.

That being said, understanding another's proposal was entirely different from being able to act on it.

In the future, he needed to be more prudent and keep his mouth shut — Tatsuya inwardly promised himself as he watched the four contestants float towards the starting line.

Being that this is on water, there's no way to draw lines (not that anyone could even if they wanted to).

Four people lined up along the passage, with Mari standing in the middle.

The other contestants were kneeling on one knee or both to prepare to charge, only Mari stood straight.

This scene primarily reflected the difference in balance between the participants, but from another perspective, Her Majesty the Queen was lording over the other participants (not just the queen, "Her Majesty" the Queen).

"Whoa, that woman is just as arrogant as usual....."

Hearing Erika's whisper, Tatsuya felt that she was displaying her enmity "as usual".

Still, he had just vowed to "keep his mouth shut", so he refrained from commenting.

Leo and Mizuki, who were seated at Erika's sides, also seemed oblivious.

The giant screen hanging from the airship in the sky displayed all four of the contestants' names.

Only Mari revealed a fearless grin.

She truly is the perfect type to play the antagonist's role, Tatsuya thought.

However, many among the female high school students would disagree with him.

When the announcer responsible for identifying the participants proclaimed Mari's name, the stands — especially the front rows — fairly shook from feminine shrieks.

Mari waved in response, which only intensified the screams.

".....Looks like our senpai has a crowd of diehard fans."

Compared to the young men who supported Mayumi, the insanity of this group was several times more intense.

"Watanabe-senpai cuts a dashing figure, so I can sympathize somewhat."

Miyuki agreed from a bystander's perspective. Ironically, after the Nine Schools Competition, Miyuki would possess eternally loyal fans from either gender that far outnumbered Mayumi's male fans and Mari's female fans. If she could foretell her own future, Miyuki may resonate with the same feeling lurking beneath Mari's mask as she smiled at her fans, but right now she couldn't care less.

"Battle Board" was a contest held at the height of summer, but the contestants did not wear swimsuits.

The bodysuits that tightly covered the entire body bore the emblems of each school.

As Mari stood above the water, her hair fluttered as it hung from the hair band keeping it in place, painting a picture that would not be out of place on the cover of a novel about young cavaliers.

Erika should have heard Miyuki's words, but she didn't immediately respond.

"Get set....."

The loudspeaker sent out the signal.

At the crack of a gun, the race was on.

"Self-detonation tactics?"

Erika murmured in disbelief.

Tatsuya was similarly struck speechless.

When the race started, the contestant from Fourth High detonated the water behind them.

She probably intended to create waves to disrupt the other players while riding the waves for further propulsion, but.....

"Ah, she stabilized."

Creating a giant tidal wave was useless if it disrupted your own balance.

Mari had successfully charged in the beginning, so she wasn't affected by the chaos caused by the contestant from Fourth High and was now completely in the lead.

Mari's surf board was sliding over the water's surface.

She probably wasn't using Move-Type Magic to steer, but treated the board and her physical body as one entity, or even casting magic on two objects simultaneously — her body itself and the board.

Regardless of which it was, this required precise target selection for magic.

The board clung to the water's surface and deftly rounded a sharp corner.

Her stability was so complete it was like her feet were glued to the board.

"So she's re-calculating Application-Type Fortifying Magic along with Move-Type Magic."

Tatsuya didn't need to dissect the Magic Sequence. He saw through the mechanism based on Mari's posture and methods for maintaining balance as she coursed through the water.

"Fortifying Magic?"

Leo's ears pricked up at those words and immediately asked.

This was an area that Leo specialized in, so there was no way he wasn't interested.

"What's the target for fortification?"

"Senpai stabilized the connection between herself and the board to avoid falling off."

Leo adopted a questioning look probably because he couldn't follow Tatsuya's meaning.

Naturally, Tatsuya never demanded that he catch on so adroitly.

"Fortifying Magic isn't only used for strengthening an object's durability, but to stabilize an object's corresponding location, do you understand so far?"

"Of course, because I use it myself."

"Watanabe-senpai cast magic to stabilize her position and connected herself to the board to form one object, then applied Move Magic to this now uniform 'body' that consists of herself and the board. In addition, this isn't a sustained-type magic but alternating between Fortifying Magic and Move Magic at appropriate intervals based on the changes in the terrain to deftly avoid magic overlap."

Owing to the fact this was a magic he specialized in, Leo could understand this was an extremely complex technique.

"Wow....."

Leo sighed in amazement.

On the other hand.....

"Yet, this method seems to be lacking something..... True, the target of Fortifying Magic isn't restricted to objects formed from the same material. Hm, given that....."

Thanks to his habits as an engineering prodigy, Tatsuya fell into a deep thought that would not be out of place for a mad scientist.

"Onii-sama?"

Miyuki's voice roused him from his contemplation.

During the brief moment where Tatsuya averted his gaze, Mari's figure had already disappeared around the blind spot and was lost to sight.

Tatsuya vaguely replied with "It's nothing" and focused his attention back onto the large screen.

Mari was gliding up the waterways against the current.

"Speed Magic."

From her movements, she must have used a technique that reversed the vectors for acceleration.

"And she also used Oscillation-Type Magic, right?"

At the same time, she employed magic to create reverse waves to lessen the water resistance.

"Nicely played, she's juggling three to four magics together during re-calculation."

Tatsuya's praise burst from his mouth.

None of the magics were particularly powerful.

Yet, the combined effect was unimaginably powerful.

Compared to Mayumi, who had raised high speed precision magic to an art form to stun the audience, Mari relied on lightning fast decision making and a wide variety of tools to paint a veritable rainbow of overlapping magics to delight the audience.

The two of them had already far exceeded high school quality.

After Mari reached the peak, she leaped down the waterfall.

The moment Mari splashed down, an obvious tidal wave splashed outwards.

The tidal wave generated by Mari not only propelled her forward, but also nearly upset the player in second place who was behind her.

"What a strategist....."

"That's just a devious personality revealing itself."

Erika replied with an angry retort to Tatsuya's whispering. Tatsuya half agreed, so he didn't make any particular rebuttal. That being said, "a devious personality" was high praise for a strategist.

Before the first lap was even finished, Mari's victory was all but certain.

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Battle Board's preliminary stage was slated for today and after lunch — only the fourth through sixth rounds were left. After deciding to watch the semifinals and finals for Speed Shooting, Tatsuya bid farewell to his friends.

He returned to the hotel and walked towards the rooms reserved for higher-ranking officers. This is to fulfill the promise he made to Kazama last night.

Kazama held the rank of major, but his experiences and the unique nature of the troops under his command granted him treatment above his official rank. In this suite that was normally restricted to colonels and higher, Kazama was enjoying a quick break with the officer cadre while enjoying the tea and snacks ordered from room service.

"So you're here, come, sit."

Tatsuya was brought into the room by the soldiers on duty (not soldiers from this base, but under Kazama's direct command) and even though Kazama extended a cordial invitation for him to be seated, Tatsuya hesitated upon seeing who the officers were.

Tatsuya's rank "Special Lieutenant" was not a "commissioned officer" but "a non-commissioned officer recognized as a soldier by international standards" (presently, this country's battalions no longer possessed the "associate officer" system). Soldiers that were not restricted by the military's ranking system but still maintained the right to participate on the front lines could only be found in the Independent Magic-Equipped Battalion's command structure during active duty. However, even without a built-in ranking system, everyone present was still a superior officer and, more importantly, an elder, so he couldn't casually accept such an invitation.

"Tatsuya, today we're not treating you as 'Strategic-Class Magician Special Lieutenant Ooguro Ryuuya', but as our good friend 'Shiba Tatsuya', so being too formal would only be inconvenient."

"It's also difficult to converse with you standing all the time, so why don't you take a seat?"

At this time, the two officers at the table also motioned for Tatsuya to sit.

"Captain Sanada, Captain Yanagi..... Understood, pardon my interruption."

Friendship that transcended age prompted Tatsuya to abandon his overly formal attitude to avoid being impolite. After a round of greetings, he sat directly across from Kazama.

They were seated at a round table.

The afternoon tea time for the Independent Magic-Equipped Battalion was for them to relax and unwind.

Even though Tatsuya's seat was closest to the door, the adults still welcomed him as one of them.

"First of all, long time no see. I know we shouldn't use tea cups for this, but cheers."

"Second Lieutenant Fujibayashi, thank you."

The female officer serving as Kazama's adjutant — more like secretary — handed him a tea cup, which Tatsuya accepted on a small plate while signaling with his eyes.

Today, she was in casual clothes rather than in uniform, which gave off the aura of "a young secretary from a major corporation".

Not just her, but everyone was in suits or casual garb where the shirts didn't match the jacket.

"In reality, we met earlier, but let's cut Fujibayashi some slack."

"Dr. Yamanaka, you don't need to force yourself."

"No, I'm not that unsociable to ruin the moment when we raise cups to celebrate our reunion."

"......The doctor's just looking for a reason to pour some brandy into the teacups, right?"

"The situation demands alcohol."

"Really..... I thought 'doctors not treating themselves' meant something else entirely....."

The one who leisurely replied to Captain Yanagi's confusion was doctor and first class healer — Combat Medic Yamanaka.

Including Kazama, there were 5 people in total who shook their heads in exasperation, which were all the officers from the Independent Magic-Equipped Battalion who greeted Tatsuya.

"Captain Yanagi, Second Lieutenant Fujibayashi, it's been a while. Captain Sanada, thanks for your recent support."

Tatsuya started off with greeting the two he hadn't seen for some time, then finished with thanking Captain Sanada who assisted him at the base last month.

"No, I'm the one who should be thanking you. Only you are capable of handling 'Third Eye's' long range precision targeting system."

"That's because that CAD was originally designed for this one to use..... Speaking of which, Doctor Yamanaka, I haven't received the examination results from last time."

"......Tatsuya, am I the only one being treated differently?"

"Doctor..... I don't think anyone could view a doctor who directly asked for permission to conduct human experimentation in a positive light."

Fujibayashi retorted at Yamanaka's words.

Yamanaka deliberately turned his head to one side.

Laughter suffused the round table.

Though they claimed that it had been a while, in reality it's not like they haven't seen each other for years.

Yanagi was the one who had been absent the longest at approximately six months, while Sanada and Yamanaka were last seen about a month ago.

The topic naturally turned to a sit rep where they conversed about the criminal organization that may seek to act during the Nine Schools Competition.

Just as they had discussed over the phone, the malefactors from last night were part of "No-Head Dragon". Unfortunately, they still had no information regarding the group's intent and goals. That being said, any one of the five people here (especially Yamanaka) could easily obtain results if they were in charge of interrogations, but currently they didn't want to proactively join the investigation.

"Still, that was quite the show you put on last night, or were you prepared ahead of time?"

"The Major overestimates this one's abilities, this one only caught wind of their presence while out on a stroll."

"That late?"

"Because CAD maintenance ran over time."

Owing to their similar age, the one Tatsuya spoke with the most in this group was of course Second Lieutenant Fujibayashi. Thanks to her military training, she possessed a magnificent figure that most people dared not to look at too openly, yet her amicable attitude and mundane wardrobe and make up allowed Tatsuya to comfortably converse with her.

"No wonder you're participating as a member of the technician team. Do your teammates know about 'Silver'?"

"Negative, that remains a secret."

Tatsuya shook his head as he replied to Yamanaka's question.

"Given the class difference, am I the only one who thinks that you serving as a CAD engineer in a high school contest constitutes cheating?"

"Captain Sanada, Tatsuya is a bona fide high school student."

Sanada grinned as he brought up a legitimate complaint. Fujibayashi smiled as well as she deflected Sanada's comment and turned back to Tatsuya.

"Why didn't you enter as a participant? I think that you would enjoy considerable success with your flash cast abilities. If necessary, even excluding 'Material Burst', you at least have 'Mist Dispersal' to fall back on."

"No, not only are both 'Material Burst' and 'Mist Dispersal' classified, their destructive power also exceeds the limits set by the competition. In addition, 'Material Burst' is only accessible with 'Third Eye'."

"But you brought the 'Trident' along, right?"

"That's also against the rules, specifically the ones regarding competition-use CADs. Furthermore, flash cast is one of the Yotsuba Family's secret techniques."

Tatsuya smiled wryly as he refuted Fujibayashi's suggestion.

Immediately afterwards, Yanagi continued in a helpless tone:

"Fujibayashi..... You're actually suggesting we use Strategic-level 'Disintegration' Magic — 'Material Burst' in a high school competition. I'm calling shenanigans."

"I also don't believe that there will be an opportunity to use 'Material Burst' in the Nine Schools Competition. However, in last year's competition, the scion of the Juumonji Family used 'Phalanx' and the young lady from the Saegusa Family cast 'Magic Shooter', so I don't think using 'Mist Dispersal' is out of bounds."

"Fujibayashi-san, the Juumonji Family's 'Phalanx' ability is defensive magic, so there's no destructive power involved. Likewise, the greatest advantage in the Saegusa Family's 'Magic Shooter' is its sheer flexibility in force applied, so its destructive power also varies. On the other hand, 'Mist

Dispersal' is indisputably an A-rank magic in destructive power that is able to reduce an object down to its molecular level, so they cannot be compared side by side."

"Aha, Captain Sanada, didn't you know? Destructive power is only measured in the events of the Nine Schools Competition that could affect the players themselves, so Speed Shooting and Icicle Destruction are not within its jurisdiction. Interestingly enough, the handbook that emphasizes safety first glosses over this point."

The Nine Schools Competition was changed to the current format 10 years ago. Of all the people present who had participated in the Nine Schools Competition, the only who had fought under the current rules was Fujibayashi, who assisted Second High in claiming the crown in her year.

Just as the two of them were about to embark upon a heated debate regarding their specialties, Kazama halted them in their tracks.

"Regardless, we cannot reveal any magic that constitutes a military secret before so many witnesses, so there's no point in discussing this, is there?"

Kazama intervened in his subordinates' debate like a man fighting off a headache.

Suddenly, his face assumed an emotionless mask as he turned on Tatsuya in a voice like cold steel:

"Speaking of which, Tatsuya, you understand that if you are called upon to serve as a participant....."

"Major, this one understands. If forced into a situation where 'Mist Dispersal' must be deployed, this one will choose to forfeit and accept his defeat."

Even with the sword still in its scabbard, Tatsuya could still tell the difference between real blades and bokkens. At any rate, seeing Kazama's serious attitude with a merciless blade lurking behind him, there was no way Tatsuya could misread Kazama's intention.

Kazama and Tatsuya both learned from the same master and there was a definite bond of friendship between the two. Yet, their mutual apprenticeship and friendship were not the first priority in Kazama's mind. If necessary, Kazama would abandon Tatsuya without any hesitation, and Tatsuya would do likewise.

".....However, this one cannot imagine any situation where he would be forced to participate as a player."

"That's a mental block. So long as you understand the situation."

Among everyone else's laughter, Kazama and Tatsuya fixed each other with an intense look and ended the conversation.

As the saying goes, "only God knows", but even with this in mind, Tatsuya's perspective was the more logical possibility. Both of them were of one mind on that point.

Nevertheless, neither Kazama nor Tatsuya were completely confident in Tatsuya's assessment of his own predicament.

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"Tatsuya-kun, over here, over here!"

This was the competition location for the Women's Speed Shooting event. After bidding farewell to Kazama's group and leaving their tea break, Tatsuya returned to find the stands bereft of spare seats. As he searched through the crowd for his friends, Erika found him first and called out to him.

"The Elite Eight must be that popular."

Tatsuya waded through the crowds and sat down next to Erika.

"That's because the President is on next — the other rounds don't have nearly as many spectators."

Tatsuya's words were only his private thoughts murmured aloud, but Miyuki, who was comfortably installed on Tatsuya's other side, politely responded.

This time, the sitting order was like this: Miyuki sat behind Leo, Mizuki was behind Erika, Honoka behind Tatsuya, and Shizuku behind Miyuki.

"Honoka, am I in your way?"

Tatsuya had hit a growth spurt since entering high school and was now nearly 180 cm (178 cm to be precise), and even with the difference in

seating height, he was still worried that he was completely eclipsing Honoka's view.

However, Honoka grinned as she shook her head at Tatsuya, who had turned around to ask.

"Is that so..... By the way, where's Mikihiko?"

"He said he wasn't feeling well, so he went back to his room to rest."

As Erika replied to Tatsuya's inquiry, her expression clearly added a "how useless" afterthought.

"He's likely affected by anxiety. I would probably faint if I wasn't wearing my glasses."

Mizuki spoke on Mikihiko's behalf.

No wonder, Tatsuya thought, this is a natural side effect for those who deal with acute senses.

He was highly interested in their respective emotional states, but opted to leave it be for now.

The instant Mayumi appeared on the shooting platform, a storm of cheers shook the observation area.

The screens placed around the observation deck flashed the words "Silence Please", causing the cheers to die out immediately.

With the absence of any sound, the anxiety level spiked.

Tatsuya pitied her opponent a little.

Regardless of the competition, when facing a superstar, there was always added stress and anxiety.

Maybe he was concerned on the opponent's behalf.

As if completely tuning out the spectators' cheers, Mayumi flicked the safety off for the rifle-shaped CAD and prepared herself for the match.

The tournament used lights to signal the start of the match.

From the Elite Eight onwards, the contest format resorted to duels. A hundred red targets and a hundred white targets were fired into the air and the victor was decided by who destroyed more of their designated target.

Actually, so long as no targets were shot forth by the machine, the round hadn't started yet.

Even so, for Speed Shooting players, the five signal lights remained the horn that sounded the commencement.

The first light flashed.

The lights gradually increased. Once they hit the peak, porcelain discs began filling the sky.

The white discs danced through the sky.

Mayumi's target color was red.

The red-tinted targets all shattered the moment they entered firing range.

"Impressive....."

Tatsuya privately agreed with the sighs coming from behind him.

It was truly impressive.

From a strategic perspective, this wasn't the most efficient method.

By taking down your own targets, your opponent wouldn't have to worry about accidentally gifting you points. The opponent could fire at any target they could see.

However, Mayumi's overwhelming power rendered this tactic moot.

"Eh?"

Honoka let out a gasp.

Shizuku made no noise, but from her breathing patterns, she was no less astounded.

"The 'Magic Shooter'..... Is even faster than last year."

Tatsuya's eyes were locked onto the flying discs and nodded at Miyuki's words.

For red discs obscured by the white discs in the sky, the ice particles shot through them "from below".

They weren't homing projectiles, as no one would test their luck with such inefficient magics.

This long range magic was attacking the red discs with ice particles from locations that were not obstructed by white discs.

She wasn't creating magic bullets, but shooting them — hence the name "Magic Shooter".

There were many magic abilities that could affect targets at long range.

In the Speed Shooting contest, Mayumi's use of bullets to snipe the target was actually the exception. Mainstream tactics involved casting Oscillation-Type Magic on the discs themselves to shatter them, or applying Move-Type Magic to have the discs collide into one another. Magic is not hampered by physical obstacles, so discs that are usually obscured from sight don't actually require a special skill to destroy.

In that case, why was the so-called "Magic Shooter" who specialized in using magic bullets from long distances deployed in this contest? What was her advantage?

The answer was that this magic allowed the user to strike from the blind spots outside of her opponent's casting range.

For example, assume that both players are using Oscillation-Type Magic on the discs in the same Speed Shooting round.

When the red and white discs are in close proximity, the two magics may interfere with one another and cause an unpredictable result – such as fizzling altogether or releasing ultrasonic shock waves.

When casting magic in the same general vicinity as other Magicians on the same long distance targets, one must carefully select the firing position and then apply strong interference.

The duel format for Speed Shooting was originally designed to test magic invocation speed and Magic Power, but with Mayumi sniping the targets from beyond her opponent's firing range, she effectively created a pocket of space where she was casting magic without interference.

Her opponent naturally enjoyed the same advantage.

In that case, the duel was decided solely on speed and precision targeting.

In terms of speed and precision targeting, Mayumi's Magic Power ranked among the foremost in the world.

High school students simply couldn't compare.

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The first day's round of "Speed Shooting" went as everyone predicted, with Mayumi earning a crushing victory in the Women's Division and the Men's Division also securing First Place.

"Congratulations, President!"

Mayumi smiled widely as she nodded to accept Azusa's praise.

"Thank you, Mari also advanced into the semifinals."

She shifted her gaze to the side.

"Currently, everything is going according to plan."

In her line of sight, Mari nodded in response.

As the night deepened, after catching a bite and some time in the bath, the only thing left was proper rest to restore what was lost during the day, so the female members (including the Public Morals Committee Chief) all congregated in Mayumi's room.

The first day's events were over and Mayumi still had to compete tomorrow, so they could save the official celebrations until after they seized the crown. Presently, they only raised cups of juice to celebrate.

The reason only women were present was because of time constraints. Still, it wasn't like they were planning on a pajama party, so even if men were present it wouldn't be an issue.

Given that, the reason why only women were present was because –

"It got tense for a bit, but Hattori managed to pull through."

Just as Mari's lifeless words implied, victory for the Men's Division was not assured. "Speed Shooting" secured First Place as predicted, but the "Battle Board" preliminaries turned out to be a hard fought contest.

"Seems like the CAD wasn't properly adjusted for him. After the round, Kinoshita-senpai and I were both working on it, but....."

"It wasn't finished."

Hearing Azusa's words, Suzune examined the maintenance reports from all members from her terminal.

"Kinoshita's skills aren't bad....."

"Alas, they're not exceptional either."

Mayumi stuck up in Kinoshita's defense, but could only smile bitterly at Mari's direct analysis. Still, Azusa felt that this assessment was overly critical.

"Well..... I don't think Kinoshita-senpai is at fault here. I feel that Hattori-kun's been out of sorts since arriving here."

"What I'm about to say may be harsh, but it is also up to the technician to take the player's mental status into account."

Yet, Mari swiftly rejected this defense.

"That may be true..... But....."

Mari was right in that this was the technician's duty, but the player also had a responsibility towards their own mental preparation.

Azusa thought of this, but kept it to herself.

"OK, Mari. Stop picking on A-chan."

Mari's logic regarding players and Azusa's logic regarding technicians weren't right or wrong, but frankly parallel to one another. This required the leadership to intervene.

"Fortunately, Hattori-kun doesn't have to compete tomorrow, so it's up to the two of them to work it out..... Still, now the question becomes what are we going to do with the players Kinoshita-kun is responsible for tomorrow?"

"Kinoshita-kun is the secondary technician for the Women's 'Crowd Ball'. Since he is the backup, I think that we'll still be OK without him."

"Yeah..... With Izumi there, I think we'll be OK....."

"Isn't leaving everything to Izumi too risky? There are six locations for Crowd Ball and two people appearing at the same location in the first round, and three people advance during the first round, then all three are in the second round at the same time. While Mayumi can cover for herself, this scenario naturally assumes the two others require CAD maintenance. Even if there is a larger interval between rounds, we still wouldn't have enough time based on our initial estimates. Wasn't that the whole point for having assistant technicians in the first place?"

Suzune supported Mayumi's decision but Mari looked reluctant. Her protest was born of the profound understanding of the importance of CAD maintenance and not disagreeing for the sake of disagreeing, but bringing up a valid argument for debate. Assigning shorthanded personnel was just such a difficult task.

"Why don't we pull the Men's assistant technician, Ishida, over to double as the Women's assistant technician?"

The Women's competition was in the morning while the Men's competition was in the afternoon, so Suzune's suggestion was valid from a scheduling point of view, but Mayumi vetoed it.

"If he had to perform maintenance during the morning and afternoon, that's too heavy of a workload for Ishida-kun. 'Crowd Ball' is the event with the highest number of rounds on that day."

"Then, can we call on Shiba-kun, who has no players scheduled for events for the next two days?"

After a brief moment of consideration, Mayumi nodded in agreement towards Suzune's proposal.

".....That might be for the best. Then, Miyuki-chan, can you alert Tatsuya-kun for us?"

"Of course."

Miyuki smiled as she nodded her head to accept Mayumi's request.

For Miyuki, any opportunity for her Onii-sama to shine was more than welcome.

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"......No wonder you visited at this hour."

Although they were siblings, this wasn't the time for young ladies to visit rooms belonging to those of the opposite gender.

Tatsuya waved Miyuki to sit on the bed and helplessly murmured.

"......Did I inconvenience you, Onii-sama?"

Miyuki fidgeted as she watched Tatsuya nervously.

"No, thank you for notifying me, but....."

Until now, so long as Miyuki had that particular look in her eyes, Tatsuya never took a hard line with her.

"Even at a hotel, this isn't the time for young women to leave their rooms by themselves, right? Also, there's been a few incidents lately, so suspicious individuals may be lurking in the corridors."

At the very least, this was a military facility, so the security was much more intense than first class civilian hotels.

Miyuki felt that this was an exaggeration, but was very pleased that Tatsuya was worried about her.

"Yes, Onii-sama, I apologize."

"I'm pretty sure there's something wrong with smiling and apologizing at the same time....."

Tatsuya complained as he also smiled. Rather than calling his earlier words a scolding, they didn't even qualify as complaints. On top of that, Tatsuya dearly loved Miyuki, so he would never harshly reprimand his little sister.

"At any rate, thank you for letting me know, I'll escort you back to your room."

Tatsuya rose from his chair but Miyuki frantically stood up and waved her hands.

"No, I can go back by myself. Isn't Onii-sama busy right now? I've already interrupted your work, so I shouldn't take up any more of your time....."

"While I was in the middle of something, this was more for leisure than anything else, so don't worry about it."

Tatsuya closed the lid of the notepad terminal as if he wanted to avoid letting his sister see it.

"But, wasn't that a CAD code?"

Miyuki wasn't fluent with hardware, but under Tatsuya's influence, she had a decent grasp of software specifications.

She was unable to fully decipher the meaning with just one glance, but based on the serial numbers and coding language, she could identify the code for Activation Sequences.

"This little thing isn't related to the competition itself, so there's no problem if I set it aside for now. Also, the code itself is more like a toy than anything else."

"A..... toy?"

"I came up with a new idea for a close combat weapon, but there's almost no practical value in it besides shocking the opponent a little. Even if I completed it, there's no market for it."

"If that's the case, it still qualifies as pioneering new magic, right? I don't think Onii-sama's inventions are pointless."

"Probably reserved for entertainment purposes..... Anyways, this isn't particularly important, so there's no rush to finish. You are, of course, 'first priority'."

"Oh dear..... Really, Onii-sama, you actually said that I'm 'more important'....."

(Wha?)

Seeing his sister clasp her face in both hands and lower her head, Tatsuya plainly felt something odd had occurred.

Apparently, his earlier words had gone in a completely mystifying direction.

(She got the literal meaning right, but somewhere a fatal language error must have occurred.....)

This confusion could not be dispelled immediately, but Tatsuya still snapped out of it faster than Miyuki.

".....Let's head out."

"Yes, Onii-sama..... And..... Miyuki is the same as Onii-sama."

"Meaning.....?"

"Miyuki also sees Onii-sama as the most important person."

"....."

Looks like his sister was still out of it — he hoped.

Right now, Tatsuya clung onto that belief.

Chapter 6

The second day of the Nine Schools Competition.

Wearing the jacket of the technician team, Tatsuya stood near First High's pavilion in the competition area.

Since the colors ceremony, this was the second time he wore this jacket (only participants were present for the opening ceremony).

Including the suit he wore for the meet and greet, and this jacket, he was unable to dispel that uncomfortable feeling.

Still, Tatsuya knew that this was mandatory, so he had to get accustomed to this.

"What is it? In a bad mood?"

"No, it's nothing. Why would you think so, President?"

Tatsuya solemnly replied to Mayumi's question, but was inwardly flustered.

Tatsuya believed that his poker face was flawless, but was he really so easy to read?

"Hm~ I wonder why?"

"Hold on, you shouldn't be asking such a vague question either....."

Tatsuya felt powerless, but only mentally.

Looks like the reason wasn't because he was telegraphing his feelings or that his breathing patterns gave him away.

However, Mayumi being able to pinpoint Tatsuya's thoughts without any warning was far more terrifying and almost threatening.

"Ignoring that for the moment, is there anything you need, President?"

Tatsuya set aside this matter for now — not like he could do anything even if he was concerned — and inquired why Mayumi sought him out before the contest began.

"Just checking on your status..... Did you memorize all the data?"

The decision to appoint Tatsuya as the assistant technician for the Women's "Crowd Ball" was made on the spot last night, so in order for Tatsuya to adequately adjust the players' CADs, he had to hurriedly memorize every player's psion specifications.

"Yes, I did."

"Everyone's?"

"Yes, I did."

After Tatsuya repeated the exact same, brief statement twice, Mayumi stared at him with her eyes wide in shock.

"This might seem like hindsight..... But Tatsuya-kun is amazing. You don't happen to have instantaneous recall or photographic memory, do you?"

"Compared to you, I'd rather have a more typical Magic Power."

"From a student's perspective, that's an impossible luxury."

Obviously, Mayumi was guaranteed a spot in the magic universities without taking the entrance exams, but she still said this.

—Accompanied by her using both hands to rub her puffed up cheeks.

"....."

"Hm? What's wrong?"

Tatsuya started massaging his temples using his thumb and index finger while Mayumi slightly tilted her head to one side.

"President, are you..... Never mind."

"?"

Tatsuya originally wanted to say "Are you actually this way and not acting?", but forcibly swallowed those words — which was a wise decision.

".....Isn't the contest about to start?"

"Indeed, let's go."

"Ah?"

"I said, let's go?"

"......Yeah, you're right."

CAD calibration was forbidden while the contest was ongoing, but calibration might be necessary immediately after the round was over.

That's why it was perfectly natural for the technician to follow the contestant around rather than waiting by the pavilion — even so, there was no need to proceed into the court at the same time, but Tatsuya walked alongside Mayumi the entire way.

"Miyuki-chan is at the observation deck?"

This was the first thing she said as they walked together.

"She went to watch 'Icicle Destruction'."

Mayumi's question didn't cause Tatsuya to think "Why do you ask?", but rather "It's this question again?".

"So..... The two of you actually act independently sometimes."

Tatsuya was careful to keep his expression neutral and not allow his displeasure to show at this answer, whereas Mayumi nodded in an expressive manner.

Tatsuya felt somewhat miserable.

"......In your eyes, are we attached at the hip?"

His expression was probably thoroughly miserable.

Mayumi hurriedly shook her hands in denial.

"Ah, no, I know that's not the case. I know that you two are apart while running errands for the Student Council and during class, so, how do I put it..... Perception, it's all a matter of perception!"

"President..... For Magicians, perception is reality."

The increasingly humid and heavy gaze prompted Mayumi to break out into an invisible sweat.

The heavy atmosphere persisted until the two of them reached the courts.

Once they reached the arena, Tatsuya felt that this would negatively impact morale, so he forcibly reined in his expressions.

Yet, when Mayumi took off her cooling jacket (a sports jacket with a built-in cooling system based on thermodynamics), Tatsuya's poker face almost slipped.

"......Are you wearing that in the competition?"

"Yes."

Mayumi's matter of fact nod caused Tatsuya to feel a headache incoming.

"Are you really wearing that uniform during the competition?"

"Eh, is it strange? ......Does it not suit me?"

".....It suits you perfectly."

"Is that so.....? Tee hee, thank you for your compliment."

Mayumi happily started stretching, while Tatsuya carefully scrutinized her one more time for verification.

No matter how he looked at it, his eyes didn't deceive him.

Polo shirt paired with miniskirt could only be described as a tennis uniform, which was more attentive to the latest fashions than competitive practicality.

Leaning slightly would cause the skirt to sway and reveal the petticoat beneath.

"Crowd Ball" was a physically demanding sport.

The shooting device uses compressed air to shoot a 6 cm diameter ball with low elasticity which players used rackets or magic to send towards the opposing courts, with the number of goals determining the victor. Each round lasted three minutes in a court encased within a transparent box. Every twenty seconds, another ball would be introduced to the mix with a total of 9 balls in play in the end, leaving the players no time to catch their breath.

Players usually wore T-shirts and shorts, though some opted to wear elbow and knee protectors to help with diving.

If wielding magic alone, there would be no need for running or wearing protective gear, though players that forgo the racket usually wear more protective gear on the court.

Usually, no one would wear clothing that would leave their limbs exposed.

(Then again, given who this is, her dictionary probably doesn't contain the word "impossible".)

Tatsuya arrived at this conclusion after a moment of observation and accepted this facet of reality.

"Tatsuya-kun..... Are you contemplating something impolite?"

"I wouldn't dare. You don't need a racket?"

This piercing accusation forced Tatsuya to sidestep quickly and adopt a more formal tone to change the topic.

"Yeah, this is my usual style."

For a moment, Tatsuya thought she was referring to the "tennis uniform" style, but Mayumi obviously meant a style that "only relied on magic".

"Which CAD are you using?"

"This one."

After Mayumi spoke, she pulled out a handgun-shaped Specialized CAD.

The gun barrel was fairly short, hence it was commonly known as the "short model" while a select minority referred to them as the "civilian model" (Tatsuya's CAD was a "long barrel", which the select minority referred to as the "carbine model").

Handgun and rifle-type CADs were both equipped with aim modifiers in the gun barrel. The "gun barrel" was actually the location of the targeting reticle for magic calculation (the relative coordinates for the Eidos within the information dimension) that functioned like a motion sensor.

The longer the gun barrel of the CAD, the greater the emphasis placed on the aim modifier.

On the other hand, for Magicians that only cared about the activation speed of Specialized CADs and didn't require any aim modification, the short model provided everything they could possibly want.

"I recall that the President usually ran Generalized CADs?"

"That's usually the case, but I'm only using one this time."

Mayumi's comment was very abstract, but Tatsuya correctly interpreted this to mean "Since this contest only requires one magic, I chose a Specialized model".

"Move-Type Magic? Or Reverse Speed Magic?"

"Correct, it's 'Multiple Bounce'."

Mayumi was carefully stretching, so she didn't play coy with Tatsuya before answering his question.

"Tatsuya-kun, could you give me a hand?"

"No problem."

Mayumi sat on the ground with both legs spread and Tatsuya gently pushed her back.

With practically no resistance, her chest was pressed against the ground.

"Using multiple bounces to take advantage of the kinetic energy vectors..... But wouldn't relying only on this magic pose a considerable risk? If the inelastic balls lose momentum along the floor or walls, you would have no way of sending them back to the other side."

Tatsuya could feel some body heat flowing across his palm as he softly whispered a warning.

"Hm! Hm hm hm..... Whew, I also prepared a few other Speed-Type Magics, but I never resorted to them last year."

She spoke nonchalantly, but this required a significant difference in strength to fuel this confidence.

Once again, Tatsuya realized how incredibly powerful Mayumi was compared to everyone else.

"That's fine."

Mayumi stretched to the left and right four times then informed Tatsuya to let go.

Tatsuya straightened and backed off a few steps whereas Mayumi closed her legs and raised a hand towards him as she looked at him.

Initially, Tatsuya wasn't certain what Mayumi wanted, but once he noticed her watching him intently with an increasingly displeased expression, he quickly got the message.

Tatsuya came around to her front and grasped her outstretched hand.

A dainty, delicate hand.

With a soft tug, Mayumi rolled handily to her feet.

"Thank you."

"No, you're welcome."

Tatsuya personally felt that his response was very cordial, but for some reason Mayumi was very happy.

"Hm~ What a novel feeling."

"Ah?"

That comment came out of the blue.

Tatsuya replied on reflex and Mayumi smiled in response.

"I have older brothers and young sisters, but no younger brother."

"Hm....."

Tatsuya was aware of this.

Unlike the Yotsuba Family that was shrouded in secrecy, the Saegusa Family was always in the public eye.

Every birthday for the children drew crowds of guests to celebrate in grandiose fashion.

This only required a cursory investigation of the members of the Saegusa Family, so it wasn't very difficult.

If he remembered correctly, besides two older brothers, she also had a pair of twin sisters in 9th grade.

"Tatsuya-kun never treated me differently, right?"

"I personally don't believe I'm pretending to be overly familiar with the President....."

Wary of falling into a trap, Tatsuya replied cautiously, but Mayumi laughed lightly.

"That's not what I meant. You wouldn't be on guard against me, flustered, or uneasy, right?"

Ignoring the first one for now, wouldn't the latter two only occur under conditions that Mayumi had created herself? Tatsuya thought but didn't verbalize.

"You address me with the proper honorifics, but in reality you're not being overly polite either. I thought you were a cold person, but you still go along with my selfish requests, so I think this is what it would be like to have a younger brother."

Tatsuya involuntarily widened his eyes at Mayumi.

Indeed, excluding her height, Mayumi had a well-rounded personality, a surprisingly feminine side and, while it was hard to notice, she did care about others in her own way so she fit the bill for an "older sister" perfectly.

Yet, in all honesty, having an older sister like that would probably mean a lifetime of stress.

".....Heaven knows, I only have a little sister after all."

"That's true."

Mayumi smiled serenely as she gazed at Tatsuya. This smile was enough to cause people to suspect she had forgotten the contest altogether.

Acutely uncomfortable, Tatsuya looked for an opportunity to escape.

"Excuse me, I think I should check on the other players' status."

"There's no need."

Unfortunately, with the intercession from a third party, his plan of egress was dashed.

"Ara, Izumin."

"Saegusa..... You're still up to your usual name-calling."

The person who looked like she was fighting off a migraine was a female student wearing the same type of jacket as Tatsuya. She was a 3rd Year student in the technician team — Rika Izumi.

"Would you prefer Rika-chan?"

"You're doing this on purpose! Eh, forget it, just call me Izumin."

"So Izumi-senpai, what do you mean by there's no need?"

Tatsuya had already learned this lesson; playing word games with Mayumi was a ceaseless struggle.

He completely disregarded Mayumi and Izumi's exchange and focused only on the first sentence.

"Hm? Oh..... Tatsuya-kun, you go ahead and take care of Saegusa's contest, I'll handle the other side."

The female student called Izumi did not express a favorable attitude towards Tatsuya's inclusion on the technician team.

Rather than being elitist, her problem likely arose from pride.

She probably believed that she was capable of handling the situation even without Tatsuya's assistance.

"Is that so, I understand."

In reality, Tatsuya really wanted to beat a swift retreat, but since the division of labor was so clearly defined, he had no way out.

So Tatsuya nodded without making any further comment.

"Then it's up to you."

Izumi left those words as a footnote and quickly departed.

"She's not a bad person....."

Mayumi exuded a powerless aura as she watched Izumi's departing figure, but the soft words that she spoke for Tatsuya's benefit went in one ear and out the other.

Regardless of what course of action Izumi took and how Mayumi tried to defend her, both were utterly immaterial to Tatsuya.

"Crowd Ball" was a sport that shared many similarities with tennis and racquetball, but there were no serving rules.

Each session lasted three minutes with a three minute break tucked in between sessions, with a total of three sessions per round (the Men's Division had five sessions).

After a signal announced the start of the contest, balls shot forth by compressed air would be released every 20 seconds and an insane flurry of balls would ensue until the ending signal.

—Generally, that was the case.

However, the contest unfolding before Tatsuya's eyes was not so.

Mayumi's opponent mirrored her in that they only chose to wield magic.

As expected of the participants who signed up for this contest, they had an exceptional grasp of Move-Type Magic.

Her opponent seemed to rely on physical movement to complement her perception and hurriedly aimed the short model handgun-shaped CAD that she held in both hands at each ball.

The balls caught in the Move-Type Magic changed direction before they fell into her half of the court and flew towards Mayumi's half of the court in an unnatural arc — and rebounded at double the speed once they passed across the net.

Every ball. With no exception.

Mayumi stood in the center of the court and held her CAD in both hands before her chest.

As she held her CAD as if she were praying, Mayumi's eyes glinted with a mysterious light as she gazed slightly downwards.

Just this alone was sufficient to deny her opponent from scoring a single point.

Visually, the distance was roughly 10 cm.

That was how far her opponent's balls were allowed to invade her position.

Mayumi's magic did not make any precise adjustments to the balls.

Neither did she aim for her opponent's blind spots, but purely rejected every ball back towards her opponent. Towards every trajectory that her opponent altered, she retaliated from every angle with what must be an incredibly difficult magic.

Yet, the only one relentlessly scoring was Mayumi.

The score was a complete landslide without Mayumi yielding a single point.

When the whistle sounded for the end of the first session, Mayumi's opponent powerlessly fell to her knees on the court.

This crumbling motion perfectly reflected her opponent's overwhelming despair.

Mayumi appeared perfectly calm and collected as she wielded her magic with a majestic flair, but her emotions were nowhere near as peaceful.

Hearing the whistle, she couldn't help but let out a long sigh of relief.

During this contest, she felt herself fall into a bitter struggle.

She wasn't being conceited, but she knew from a purely objective sense that her Magic Power far outstripped her opponent. As long as she could maintain the course, victory was assured during the next session.

The problem lay in the pair of eyes fixed on her from the side of the court.

Mayumi was accustomed to the gazes of other people.

Since her youth, she had always dwelt in the public eye.

No matter if the gazes were filled with pure admiration or hiding dark, jealous, or other naked negative emotions, Mayumi dealt with it as if they were the very oxygen that surrounded her.

Nevertheless, the gaze that she endured for the past three minutes was altogether unlike anything she had felt before.

As if every inch of her was beneath a microscope.

That was not simply someone seeing her naked or something like that (though that was also a major problem in and of itself).

The look that Mayumi felt from him — from Tatsuya, was not something so superficial.

Not just her skin, but everything beneath — the flesh and bone that made up her physical attributes, her consciousness, emotions, value system, temperament, habits, hobbies, the experiences that made her who she was today, the talent and diligence that supported her thus far — everything that constituted the person "Saegusa Mayumi" was being decrypted and bared beneath the sun. This pair of eyes caused her to feel an unfamiliar sense of dread.

This was the first time Tatsuya observed Mayumi's contest from a close proximity.

Still, he should have observed the 1st Year participants under his care multiple times during practice at this distance, yet none of the 1st Year participants complained of being ill at ease.

Mayumi believed that none of the younger women could withstand this feeling.

In that case, this feeling was either her own misconception, or — something that only she could feel.

Right now, she was in the middle of the three minute break where the players would usually towel off the sweat or grab a drink of water.

Unfortunately, her bag containing her towel and water was next to Tatsuya.

Walking off the court was the same as actively moving towards where Tatsuya was waiting — where he lay in ambush.

Mayumi was a little scared of leaving the court.

That being said, she couldn't stay on the court either. Even though she hadn't moved a muscle during the earlier session, she should definitely

take the opportunity to take a break right now. Not only that, she needed to replenish lost moisture and head towards the next court.

She wouldn't have cared if she shocked the Operations Committee Members, but with her position, she couldn't afford to worry the students that came to cheer her on.

Mayumi took a deep breath and expelled all her unease and worry.

(Forget it, women need to be courageous!)

Mayumi ordered her feet to start walking.

"Good work."

At her underclassman handing her a towel, Mayumi felt a sense of disappointment as that nameless dread seemed to fade away like a dream.

As usual, any thoughts he had beneath that serious visage were completely obscured by the poker face that even she couldn't read. This young man gave her a formless and unidentifiable sense of dread, but at the same time provided a miraculous sense of relief that he would never betray her.

Her earlier comment about "having a younger brother" was something spontaneous or intended to tease Tatsuya. While phrased as a joke, on some level it reflected Mayumi's real thoughts.

Mayumi came to the conclusion that being afraid of him was ridiculous, so she adopted an obstinate attitude.

"Don't say good work yet, the contest hasn't ended, so this isn't the time to relax."

Tatsuya was on the representative team, but he wasn't a participant himself.

He was only on duty before and after the contests and was merely a bystander during the events, so telling him "this isn't the time to relax" was very odd, but Tatsuya made no mention of it despite noticing this.

"No, it's over."

He was pointing towards a more practical matter.

"Ah?"

"The opposing participant is unable to continue and, even if she were going to enter the second session, would definitely keel over from exhaustion in the middle. The auxiliaries from the other side are also aware of this, so this round will conclude with their surrender."

Mayumi turned around to find the opposing team's tactical advisors discussing with the panel of judges about this exact topic.

The participant was sprawled on top of a long chair while covered in medical detection equipment.

"Psion exhaustion due to continuous magic invocation. Most likely a mistaken assignment. She was a little lacking to be your opponent, President."

"......You understood that much just from seeing that?"

"So long as I can 'see clearly'."

There was no way the panel of judges could hear Tatsuya speak, but the moment he finished speaking, the panel announced that Mayumi's opponent had withdrawn.

Dazed, Mayumi stood stock still without budging, an extremely rare side of her that would normally prompt a laugh. Yet, Tatsuya did not smile, and merely urged Mayumi to start moving.

"Let's return to the pavilion. It's best to review your CAD and prepare for the next round."

"Yeah, you're right, I'll leave that to you."

Right now, Tatsuya was completely in control of the situation, but Mayumi didn't make any pointless resistance as she followed Tatsuya after picking up her bag.

After Tatsuya activated the maintenance device, Mayumi handed him her CAD and plopped down beside him.

Not across from him.

Mayumi wasn't wearing her cooling jacket that extended to her knees so she was still in her "tennis uniform" that she wore for the match, but this wasn't because she was in a teasing mood, rather that Tatsuya was no longer causing her to feel unnaturally cold.

The two of them were close enough that their shoulders could rub against one another, but Tatsuya never spared a glance towards her exposed thighs.

Nor was Mayumi upset by this.

Her concentration was completely devoted to the maintenance device as well as the personal CAD currently attached to the machine.

"Don't you need to measure my current status?"

"The duration was only a paltry 10 to 15 minutes, so even if I could rewrite the code, there wouldn't be any time to test it, so there would be little point in taking the extra time to run measurements."

This occurred quite often during their mutual conversation, but this time Mayumi involuntarily tilted her head.

According to what he just said, this sounded like he could get a ballpark estimate completely independent of the machine.....

".....You can tell visually?"

"Of course, surely the President knows as well?"

"That....."

"The President also knows that as long as they're Magicians, they can tell whether magic's activated normally or if a CAD is functioning normally without the use of machines, right?"

"This I know."

"On some level, I'm just a little more knowledgeable."

Tatsuya continued to watch the scrolling character strings.

Mayumi was very interested in exactly what this "some level" was, but she didn't dare to disturb an engineer at work to satiate her curiosity.

Tatsuya removed the CAD from the maintenance device and turned off the power before inspecting the trigger and Activation Sequence circuit, then personally handed the CAD back to Mayumi.

Just as he promised, he never touched the code inside.

Mayumi privately heaved a sigh of relief (she thought she managed to hide it, but Tatsuya saw everything), but owing to some reason, after she received the CAD, she curled her finger around the trigger and put it on her thigh.

"President..... That's a little disconcerting, can you not point the muzzle at me?"

Strictly speaking, a CAD doesn't have a "muzzle".

Large, rifle-shaped CADs are usually equipped with image detectors at the front that gives the impression of the "muzzle" from a laser gun, but regardless of whether it was a long or short model, the "gun barrel" was made of metal.

Still, the overall design mirrored that of a real firearm, so those that are aware of the danger guns pose would naturally feel uncomfortable staring down the "muzzle".

"Ah, sorry."

Tatsuya wasn't certain how familiar Mayumi was with this situation, but she frankly apologized and shifted her CAD and left the muzzle pointed at herself.

"I should be the one apologizing for troubling you with such trivialities."

"Please don't concern yourself, this is basic manners after all. So how is it?"

Mayumi's question was once again overly simplified, but Tatsuya had no problems navigating through her cryptic meaning.

"I felt that the calibration was well executed. No overclocking, no unnecessary unique features, it was a faithful job done strictly by the rules. There was an overemphasis on stability that led to a more convoluted Activation Sequence in some areas, but taking the President's Magic Power into consideration, I'd say this garners full marks."

At any rate, this wasn't the time for needless flattery or nitpicking, so Tatsuya bluntly made his assessment.

Tatsuya answered this question with his eyes still watching the Activation Sequence display on the maintenance device, so when he turned around — he discovered Mayumi in a profound state of embarrassment.

"Is that so.....? Hehehe, that makes me incredibly happy."

The corners of her eyes were dyed pink as she slightly averted her eyes with a bashful smile.

Compared to blushing obviously, this reaction was even more awkward.

".....Is that so?"

The reason why Tatsuya asked was that he was honestly lost on how to respond, but the real question lurking at the bottom of his heart was that Mayumi should have long been inured to hearing such praise on a daily basis.

"Indeed, to receive the compliments of someone who usually gives scant praise, isn't that something worthy of being happy about?"

Tatsuya didn't believe that he was a completely mature adult.

From an objective standpoint, he felt that he was still an immature child.

That being said, Mayumi's assessment made him out to be one of the fringe members of society unable to feign politeness, which he thoroughly disagreed with.

".....I can be just as polite as anyone else."

However, Tatsuya's rebuttal only earned a sweet smile from Mayumi that clearly said she saw through his subterfuge.

"So you were just being polite just now?"

".....No, I wasn't."

Mayumi's delighted smile struck Tatsuya in the wrong way, but continuing this conversation served no practical purpose.

Also, there was no reason he had to respond in the first place.

Unruffled, Tatsuya calmly accepted Mayumi's smile.

Among the events in the Nine Schools Competition, "Crowd Ball" was the event with the most matches this day.

In terms of pure number of matches, "Monolith Code" was the one sport among the other six that had the most matches. "Crowd Ball" and "Icicle Destruction" each had five, but "Monolith Code" and "Icicle Destruction" were split across two days, whereas "Crowd Ball" had to finish all 5 matches within half a day.

The allotted time was short, but the nature of the event and the fact that each session lasted three minutes with almost continuous magic invocation with no chance to catch a breather combined to create a situation that was in no way less arduous than the other events.

Thus, how to gauge the use of Magic Power was absolutely vital for seizing the gold in this event.

The goal was, of course, two consecutive victories.

During the match, the players weren't trying to send back every ball haphazardly, but to take into account which shots should be allowed to score in order to properly pace themselves.

Mayumi, who could continuously channel her magic throughout the entire session, was undoubtedly an outlier in this situation.

Even so, Mayumi didn't charge forward and rely solely on her strength in battle.

She also adopted strategies of her own.

Two consecutive victories was absolutely mandatory — this would prevent people from saying "Wait, didn't she just power through to victory?"

By choosing magic that was unsuited to this event by solely rebounding the balls back, this was to avoid exhaustion from continuously replicating magic — this also denied people from claiming that "She's not actually rationing her Magic Power, right?"

Owing to these reasons, her philosophy in battle was to go all out from the start without a trace of hesitation.

Yet, when the second round started, Mayumi was struck by a rare sense of confusion.

Her status was excellent.

Just like earlier, half the round was already over with her opponent unable to score a single point during the first match.

Her confusion came from a completely opposite reason.

(How.....?)

True, thanks to her opponent withdrawing from the first round, she had more time to rest than usual.

Still, this was a tightly packed schedule with 5 rounds crammed into half a day.

Usually, her mental and physical status would be gradually worn down from exhaustion, but they would definitely not show a marked improvement that even she could notice.

Thus, there must be some reason behind this highly unusual circumstance.

Mayumi could only think of one possible explanation.

As soon as the ending whistle sounded—

Mayumi decided to interrogate her perfidious underclassman.

"Tatsuya-kun, I thought you said you didn't alter the Activation Sequence?"

This was completely opposite from how the first round ended.

As soon as the judges confirmed the end of the round, Mayumi stormed to where Tatsuya was on the sidelines.

Mayumi's accusatory appearance caught Tatsuya by surprise, but he still replied back in a calm manner.

"I never touched the Activation Sequence and there shouldn't be any performance issues, unless you noticed something wrong?"

"Liar!"

Mayumi pointed a finger at Tatsuya's nose, her whole stance quivered like it was about to give off "Bishi!" sound.

"The efficiency of magic construction was significantly higher and, since there was no time to change the hardware, the only possibility is that you altered the software!"

"......So the efficiency coefficient wasn't lower, but higher?"

Tatsuya's clearly befuddled question took the wind out of Mayumi's sails.

"That's true..... But....."

This would be a whole other story if efficiency dropped, but Mayumi finally noticed that her attitude was wholly ridiculous for someone coming to complain that her performance had shown marked improvement.

"Regardless, why don't you take a seat first?"

Still wearing a baffled expression, Tatsuya handed her a towel, which Mayumi accepted awkwardly before sitting down with a look of consternation on her face.

"The efficiency coefficient rose likely because the garbage was removed."

Tatsuya sat half a body length away from Mayumi and intentionally didn't watch her as he softly settled her down.

"Don't mess around with me. I was watching you the entire time. You didn't take apart the CAD for cleaning, nor did you use any cleaning fluids, correct?"

Mayumi said petulantly, but Tatsuya replied back patiently.

"No, I wasn't cleaning the hardware, I was removing the unnecessary software."

CAD performance was also affected by the user's mental condition.

If the user didn't trust the engineer, then this would obviously negatively impact the CAD's performance.

Since he did act without giving prior warning, which meant that he did not go through the informed consent phase, Tatsuya still felt that it was necessary for him to give an in-depth explanation.

"The President's CAD had system files left over from earlier versions of the OS, so I had these removed. While previous system files rarely accumulate these garbage files, that doesn't mean that they are completely removed either. By completely erasing these files, CAD performance can be improved by a few percentage points. However, this usually would not bring about an immediately noticeable improvement, hence I didn't inform you beforehand. This just goes to show that the President's senses are just that refined and I was being overly rash."

"Ah, that..... If that's all it is, then don't worry about it."

Tatsuya's excessive bow and apology prompted Mayumi to frantically wave both her hands.

"In that case, this also shows that Tatsuya-kun was dutiful in all regards, so I should be the one apologizing for suspecting you in the first place."

When Tatsuya raised his head, Mayumi was also bowing to him in apology.

Tatsuya couldn't help but note how swiftly she was able to shift gears.

"Then, let's end this conversation here."

He also felt that she was someone who could readily admit her own mistakes.

"You're right."

Must be from a composure born of maturity.

"Then, Tatsuya-kun....."

Even so, it wasn't like she was taking the high ground either.

"What is it?"

"That calibration method..... or do you call it garbage cleanup? Can you teach me later?"

No ill intent whatsoever.

"No problem, but please focus on your next match."

"Of course, leave that to Onee-san!"

At this stage, choosing to adopt an older sister's attitude could make anyone smile.

And so, Mayumi completely denied her opponent from scoring a single point. She won every match 2-0 without yielding a single point and took sole possession of the crown for the Women's "Crowd Ball".

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"Icicle Destruction", also known simply as "Pillar Knock", was held in an outdoor arena that was 12 meters long and 24 meters wide. The field was divided into two halves, each with 12 ice pillars that were 1 meter wide and 2 meters tall, with the victor destroying all the pillars in the opposite field first.

Thanks to this, "Icicle Destruction" required preparation on a massive scale.

Requiring hundreds of huge ice pillars that needed to be kept frozen during the height of summer, it greatly limited the number of arenas, even with the military's complete support.

Owing to the limits on ice production, the Nine Schools Competition could only afford to prepare two arenas for both the Men's Team and Women's Team for a total of 4 arenas. Each of the two sites had 12 matches in the first round and six matches in the second round for a total of 18 matches, which was the maximum limit for one day.

"Nevertheless, this is a contest that severely depletes Magic Power. If they held every match in one day, many of the players wouldn't make it. For the single elimination contest on the second day, there's an extremely short interval between each match. Thus, there is some truth in the saying that 'Icicle Destruction is won by those with the greatest stamina'."

Tatsuya was lecturing on the details while the one listening and nodding was Shizuku.

Miyuki was also present, but if his sister was the only one here, then Tatsuya wouldn't have to explain at this particular time.

The three of them weren't in the audience stands, but the auxiliary working area.

Their goal was to watch Kanon's match from close proximity to get a first hand experience of what the contest was like.

Kanon was busy discussing the final details with Isori, so this wasn't a good time to interrupt them.

Everyone went to watch the Men's "Crowd Ball" contest.

Sayaka came to cheer on Kirihara, Erika chose to accompany her and roped Mizuki into the mix, then Mizuki invited Mikihiko to come along, finally culminating with Mikihiko grabbing Leo. And that's how it was.

After hearing Miyuki's report, Tatsuya maintained a "what a duplicitous bunch" feeling. As for who among them was duplicitous, some things are better left unsaid.

Kanon finally stepped onto the stage.

There were two platforms that stood four meters high at the two ends of the arena.

The players had to use magic to defend the icicles in their own half of the court while simultaneously destroying their opponent's icicles.

After entering the arena, all restrictions on magic safety were removed, so this was publicly acknowledged to be the most intense of all the magic contests.

"Shiba-kun."

After seeing Kanon off to the platform, Isori turned to wave at Tatsuya.

"Let's go too."

Isori invited Miyuki and Shizuku, who brought Tatsuya with them.

Behind the platforms where the players stood, there was a special observation deck for support personnel.

Here, there were several devices responsible for monitoring the players' physical condition as well as a large window for viewing the competition.

"How's Chiyoda-senpai's status?"

Tatsuya felt that it was impolite to remain silent, so he supplied an icebreaker question.

"She's very motivated, to the point that I'm a little concerned that she's too fired up and will lose steam in tomorrow's matches."

With a smile on his face, Isori answered Tatsuya's customary question.

There was no trace of unease on his face.

"I heard that senpai won the first round with the fastest time ever recorded."

"Well, that is Kanon's personality..... I earnestly hope that she would be a little more prudent, so those watching over her could relax somewhat."

Tatsuya was quite interested in Isori's wry smile and response.

Tatsuya was accompanying Mayumi all through the morning, so of course he missed the first round in the morning.

He only knew that Kanon claimed the first round using the least amount of time possible.

That being said, while the match time was very short, quite a few of her own icicles had fallen

"It's starting."

Shizuku's soft voice prompted Tatsuya to direct his gaze back towards the arena.

With the shrill sound of the starting whistle, the earth groaned.

"Mine Genesis."

This was no Mine Field, this was Mine Genesis.

The scene before Tatsuya's eyes forced him to speak its name.

Versatility and speed were the crowning advantages of Modern Magic. Nonetheless, Magicians are also human, so there are fields where they specialize at or are not adept at.

Since magic talent is inherited, blood relations within a family naturally share similar aptitudes towards magic fields.

The Yotsuba Family, with each family member excelling in a unique area, was a notable exception.

Within influential families, besides everyone's individual names, family members that share a notable skill usually share a second name as well — almost like a special title.

Some of the more famous ones include the Juumonji Family's "Phalanx".

The Ichijou Family's "Rupture".

The Saegusa Family did not have a system that they did not excel at, so they were ironically referred to as "Omnipotent".

The Chiba Family was known as "Magic Swordsman" — this title referred more to their skills and techniques than any unique talent the family possessed, but was still used to refer to this family as a whole.

The Chiyoda Family was known as "Mine Genesis".

The Magicians of the Chiyoda Family specialized in using Long Range Solid Matter Oscillation Systematic Magic, particularly when it comes to using Earthshaker magic.

Dirt, rock, sand, cement, all materials were irrelevant.

A powerful oscillation could be applied as long as the solid matter was recognized as the "Earth's surface". This was the true face of the Chiyoda Family's specialty "Mine Creation", with the Chiyoda Family's title derived from "Mine Creator" = "Mine Genesis".

The opposing field suffered vertical vibrations that ran perpendicular to the epicenter, with two icicles collapsing each time.

Her opponent tried to counter with Move-Type Magic "Compulsory Arrest" in an effort to stifle any motion on part of the object, but "Mine Genesis" continued switching targets at a speed that her opponent was unable to match, so by the time five of her twelve pillars had collapsed, her opponent abandoned all pretense of defense and concentrated solely on the attack.

"Huh?"

"What?"

"?"

Tatsuya and the others all expressed their astonishment in different ways, whereas Isori smiled wryly from the side.

As he watched the pillars on his side collapse without any resistance, he shook his head helplessly.

"Should I commend Kanon for going all out or criticize her for being overly reckless..... Her methodology revolves around going for the jugular before she gets KO'ed."

"No, well..... I hardly feel that this is the wrong tactic."

Her opponent had switched from defense to offense, and her resistance was suitably lowered.

By the time the number of pillars left on her side dipped to six, Kanon had already collapsed every pillar in her opponent's territory.

"Victory!"

Kanon smiled widely as she flashed a victory signal while descending from the platform.

The target of her smile was, of course, Isori.

Isori's face plainly said "what am I going to do with you", but he was wearing the same smile.

"How should I describe this....."

"Match made in heaven?"

Miyuki was reluctant to voice her opinion, but Shizuku had no such compunctions.

"You two should say that they understand one another perfectly."

Hearing the two of them, Tatsuya smiled wryly for a completely different reason.

Still, Tatsuya also acknowledged that they were a "match made in heaven".

The two of them had a lot of synergy.

The player and the auxiliary, even though they didn't step onto the stage together, the two of them were in the fight as one.

Yet — Tatsuya thought.

If they were a pair with so much synergy, would Isori be able to fulfill his duties to the utmost when paired with other players?

There were 40 players and only 8 technicians.

On average, each technician was responsible for five players.

Tatsuya was in charge of the 1st Year Women's Team, but that was still six people, seven if you counted the impromptu addition in the morning.

Once they forged an intense emotional bond with one individual player, could they put forth their all with the other players?

Tatsuya was also facing that quandary.

Would he really go all in for Shizuku or Honoka the same way he would for Miyuki?

"......Shiba-kun, what's up?"

"No, it's nothing."

It's not like he could actually ask Isori something like "Do you work so hard for every player?".

Tatsuya replied back in a completely inane and normal manner to muddle through Isori's question.

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After securing advancement to the third round, Kanon and company — with Tatsuya, Miyuki and Shizuku in tow — returned to the pavilion in high spirits, only to frown at the dour atmosphere suffusing the camp.

".....What happened?"

Isori asked Suzune, who was probably the only one who maintained her usual attitude.

Suzune turned around to reveal an even more blank emotion than normal.

"The Men's 'Crowd ball' event didn't perform as expected — we're recalculating the odds right now."

The standings in the Nine Schools Competition were determined by the aggregate score from each event.

First Place received 50 points, Second Place received 30 points, and Third Place received 20 points.

Fourth Place finishes in "Speed Shooting", "Battle Board", and "Mirage Bat" netted 10 points. "Crowd Ball" and "Icicle Destruction" only awarded points to the top three, so the three teams that are eliminated in the third round each receive 5 points.

For "Monolith Code", First Place would receive 100 points, Second Place receives 60 points, and Third Place only gets 40 points, which makes it the single largest event in terms of points.

Half the points from the Newcomers Division would be added into the total.

This was the score breakdown for the Nine Schools Competition.

Anyone not in the top four or six would receive no points, so even if First Place was out of the question, taking Second through Fourth place was still valuable in scoring points to contest the overall victor. According to this breakdown, advancing as many players in as many contests as possible to the single elimination or duel phases was one of the keys to victory.

"Not performed as expected means....."

"The players were eliminated during the first, second, and third rounds."

Isori asked with trepidation while the voice that answered him was quite indifferent by comparison.

"While we held onto next year's right to compete, this result was thoroughly unexpected."

The voice was largely indifferent likely because the person being questioned was struck heavily by the news.

Compared to the other events, the Men's "Crowd Ball" lineup was certainly lacking in firepower.

Regardless of the fact they didn't possess an ace like the Women's "Speed Shooting", "Crowd Ball", and "Battle Board" or the upcoming Men's "Icicle Destruction" who was "assured of victory", they still should possess enough talent to compete for First Place.

"The Newcomers Division is a little harder to estimate, but based on our current lead, if the Women's "Battle Board", Men's "Icicle Destruction" as well as "Mirage Bat" and "Monolith Code" all seize First Place, we're still in the clear."

A 2nd Year student from the tactical advisory team made the report.

Tatsuya, who was just listening as a bystander, felt that this threshold was a little high.

Including both the Men's and Women's contests, they wanted to claim First Place in four of the six remaining events in the Official Division.

Katsuto and Mari could be relied on to win the gold in their respective events, but based on these calculations, if any accident were to occur, they ran the risk of morale reaching a breaking point.

Still — this wasn't something that Tatsuya had to concern himself with.

He was probably overstepping his boundaries by worrying about these things.

Compared to the points, Tatsuya personally was more mindful about something else.

Kirihara was participating in the Men's "Crowd Ball" event.

Certainly, Kirihara had a reckless side to him, but he also possessed a strong sense of duty.

He wouldn't be depressed because of this turnout, would he.....?

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After the day's events had drawn to a close, Tatsuya found Kirihara near the hotel's rest area close to dusk.

Outwardly, he looked perfectly normal.

Sayaka was sitting next to Kirihara.

Kirihara was working hard to keep up a cheerful appearance, but Tatsuya could tell at a glance that he was forcing a smile.

"Kirihara-senpai, thanks for your hard work."

"Ho, so it's Shiba."

Of course, Tatsuya could have chosen to pass by the rest area without saying a word, but he didn't do so.

"I was taken out early in the second round, and quite badly at that."

He was definitely putting on a strong front, but he recovered faster than Tatsuya suspected.

Maybe athletes were more accustomed to victory and defeat and were more resilient when it came to dealing with the bitterness of defeat.

Tatsuya always lost when he was trading blows with his master so he didn't have any real "competitive" experience, and could only rely on logic to explain this.

Tatsuya was unable to judge whether this was an appropriate moment to offer words of comfort, so he elected to speak the truth.

"Senpai was unlucky to draw Third High's ace that was favored to win the event in the second round and only lost by a grand total of eight points after losing three out of five matches. This favored player was exhausted from the long struggle with senpai and was promptly eliminated in the third round, so this was a Pyrrhic victory for him as well."

".....Man, you're one blunt guy."

Tatsuya never bothered to sugarcoat the defeat and delivered a cold analysis that didn't smack of comfort, but Kirihara wasn't angry.

"You never thought that I would be depressed?"

Kirihara's tone and expression were more teasing than anything else.

"I did, but I couldn't think of any consolation."

The scene was dead silent for a few seconds.

Kirihara suddenly burst into laughter.

And he was laughing to the point that he was bent over the sofa.

Enough to thoroughly discomfit Sayaka by his side.

Tatsuya continued to watch him without any expression.

"Shiba..... You really are an interesting guy. Usually, now would be the time to wear a totally~ awkward expression and quickly pass me pretending not to see me, not the time to actually sit down and talk."

That choice — intentionally overlooking him — was also on the table, but Tatsuya believed that wordlessly passing by wasn't cordial enough. However, this time it looked like Tatsuya was being a "busybody".

Tatsuya realized that he shouldn't even be taking how cordial he was into consideration since that didn't jibe with his personality, but.....

"Still, I feel a lot better thanks to you. Since you said it was a 'Pyrrhic victory', then that must be how it was. This shows that I've still got a lot of potential."

.....Looks like that wasn't the case.

Whether Kirihara truly believed that was immaterial.

Likewise, whether this was truly the result Tatsuya was aiming for was also immaterial.

Despite the outcome falling into considerable doubt, the basic personnel duties did not change very much.

The ones responsible for odd jobs and errands might claim otherwise, but since Tatsuya was a member of the technician team, the brass from First High wasn't foolish enough to have him work on menial tasks and run the risk of endangering his original duties.

After preparing for the Newcomers Division two days from now, double checking the physical and mental conditions of the players under his care and running a final compatibility test for CADs, today's work schedule came to a close.

Tatsuya received a long package in the mail from the hotel counter and returned to his own room.

It wasn't dinner time yet.

There was still ample time left, so Tatsuya opted to test the item in the package.

He took a glance at the clock to verify when the dining hall opened.

There was still a significant interval until he had to meet up with Miyuki.

Tatsuya unpacked the parcel and gazed at the contents within.

This was something he called Four Leaves Technology's CAD Development 3rd Division in the early hours of the morning for.

The components were all universal, the shape exceedingly simple, and was assembled to the point that an automatic construction device could do the rest by reading the manual. Even so, the fact that this could be assembled and shipped all within half a day was quite impressive.

(I hope Ushiyama-san isn't pushing himself again.....)

Should he be saying pushing himself, or pushing his subordinates?

Tatsuya took great pains to carefully remind them that this item was "partially out of curiosity".

Regardless, Tatsuya couldn't "really" turn back the clock, so fussing over these details was useless at this point.

After he opened the package and took a look inside, he found a combination seal around a long, thin container. This case was usually intended to transport CADs with the dimensions of a shotgun.

Tatsuya punched in the usual code.

There was a "sword" inside the box.

The item Tatsuya removed from the box had the outward appearance of a long sword with an upgraded hand guard.

The entire length measured 70 cm, and 50 cm without the hand guard — that was how it was shaped.

There was no blade.

This did not refer to the lack of an edge, but the fact that this tool was never forged to be a "sword".

The literal meaning of the words seemed paradoxical, but a better description would be "a metallic bokken forged to look like a long sword".

Or maybe it was "flat rod with an added hand guard".

This item was plainly not any ordinary rod.

After thumbing the activation button and upping the psion intake, a familiar feeling passed across Tatsuya's hand.

This item was in the same vein as Erika's police baton in that it was a weapon that concealed a CAD.

The utility was even more restricted than a Specialized CAD and could only provide one Activation Sequence. Erika's CAD was a Specialized model that retained the ability to switch abilities. In comparison, this was a Specialized CAD that possessed only one function, making it a prototype for "Weaponized Integrated CADs".

Tatsuya measured the distance to the wall to gauge whether he should take a test swing when someone knocked on the door. The perfect timing caused Tatsuya to chuckle wryly as he placed the prototype on the table.

There was some time until the arranged meeting time, but given that the presence on the other side of the door did nothing to conceal themselves, he knew that friends had come calling.

And this prototype suited that friend very well.

Rather than testing this himself, it would be far more interesting to have that guy handle it — Tatsuya thought as he opened the door.

"Onii-sama, is this a good time?"

The leader and the one who spoke up first was his little sister.

Tatsuya pushed the door open and beckoned everyone inside. Erika, who was following Miyuki, came close enough that the two of them were almost touching.

Next, Honoka, Shizuku, Mizuki, and Leo came in, with Mikihiko bringing up the rear.

Rather than saying ladies first, it would be more appropriate to say this was how the pecking order went.

Still, while this was a double room for the sake of storing equipment, it was still a squeeze with so many people piling in at once.

Just the chairs and bed weren't enough, someone even had to sit on the table — which was neatly ordered and not the least bit sloppy, so Tatsuya had no complaints.

Erika was the one sitting on the table, so of course she was the one who noticed the "sword" on the table, and it naturally aroused her interest.

"Tatsuya-kun, is that..... a blade replica? Except it looks more like a sword."

"Negative."

"Then an iron whip?"

"Also negative..... I don't think the samurai of this country would use weapons like iron whips."

"Who uses the term samurai in this day and age..... Then what is it? .....Ah, is it a Houki?"

Erika flipped it over and examined both sides and asked again upon noticing the trigger on the handle.

"Correct, to be precise, this is a Weaponized Integrated CAD, commonly known as weaponized calculation devices. The CAD is specifically attuned to use one type of magic only that can also double as a close combat weapon that uses aforementioned magic."

"Wow....."

The reason why Erika made this sound wasn't because the Weaponized Integrated CAD was incredibly rare, but because this was the first time she saw one in the form of a "sword". Erika wasn't the only one gazing at the sword in her hand, both Honoka and Shizuku were looking on with deep interest.

Miyuki's face revealed an "Ah, so that's what it was" expression, clearly because she remembered the conversation from last night.

Neither Mizuki nor Mikihiko expressed any interest, probably because they preferred familiar objects rather than foreign materials.

Tatsuya glanced at the other person standing to the side and smiled mischievously as he plucked the prototype from Erika's hands.

"Leo."

And tossed it towards Leo, who was standing off to one side with his face averted.

"Whoa! Tatsuya, isn't that kind of dangerous?"

In reality, Leo was burning to give it a go, but he feigned disinterest due to his ongoing cold war against his nemesis (?) Erika, so while he was outwardly frantic, he eagerly grabbed hold of the sword hilt.

Tatsuya completely ignored his protest and sent a challenging smirk his way.

"Want to give it a try?"

"Eh, me?"

Leo's mouth split into a wide grin.

To the side, Erika wore a "This guy is easy to read....." expression, to which Tatsuya spared only a single glance before directing his attention back to Leo.

"This weaponized calculation device was created by merging a striking weapon with the Fortifying Magic that Watanabe-senpai used during the 'Battle Board' event, with the blade also serving as a slashing weapon after being reforged, so I think this suits you very well."

"So Tatsuya made this?"

"Yes."

"Hold on."

Mikihiko inserted himself into Leo and Tatsuya's conversation.

Initially, he wore an apathetic expression, but he was paying attention to the entire conversation.

"Watanabe-senpai's event was yesterday, so you made this in one day? This doesn't look like a ready-made product."

"The components themselves are all commonplace. The outer frame is also a generic alloy, so there are no special materials involved."

"But this still isn't something you can manually forge, right? You shouldn't have that much spare time....."

"Why of course, I only came up with the design, then had a familiar factory construct this using automatic assembly devices."

Miyuki overheard the entire conversation and when she heard the term "familiar factory", she almost burst into laughter. Thankfully, she regularly prepared several masks for occasions like these, so she didn't draw any attention to herself or her brother.

"So Leo..... Want to give it a try?"

Tatsuya's words were like the sweet whispers of the demon Mephistopheles.

Even while knowing something was afoot, the lure was irresistible.

"......OK, I'll be your guinea pig."

"He fell for it."

Shizuku's soft whisper succinctly reflected everyone's inner thoughts.

Next, Tatsuya pulled out a HMD with light refracting mirrors and a speaker attached.

"This is the instruction manual."

Seeing the HMD in front of him, Leo seemed to not comprehend Tatsuya's words as a question mark sprouted on his head.

"Take a look, the user's manual for the weaponized calculation device is recorded within."

"Ah? Oh....."

This object that Tatsuya handed him (more like tossed to him) appeared to have images and sound files stored on it, which included the Weaponized Integrated CAD instruction manuals. Leo let out an "I get it now" expression and accepted the HMD from Tatsuya's hands.

"This counts as a virtual terminal device, right?"

Honoka, who asked the question, wasn't the only one wondering about this.

Virtual information terminal devices posed considerable harm to immature Magicians.

With this in mind, First High forbade students from using virtual terminal devices.

Tatsuya himself insisted on using a material terminal device, but asked his friend to use a virtual terminal device. Even if the device was restricted to visual and hearing, everyone held the same misgivings.

"It's nothing that outrageous, but they do share some similarities."

"......Is this OK?"

"Huh? Oh..... You're referring to the harm caused by the virtual terminal device?"

"Uh..... Yeah."

"There's no need to worry on that account. The risks from virtual terminal devices arise from the user's inexperience. If used strictly for testing realistic conditions, then it's actually quite a valuable tool."

"I don't follow....."

Honoka's tone towards Tatsuya was very polite, but there were traces of Miyuki's influence mixed in.

"Magic is a skill that uses perception to temporarily alter reality. Virtual terminal devices create illusions that people mistake for reality."

Tatsuya's explanations were always attentive and exhaustive, which possibly was a reflex on his part.

"The two of them share the distinction that they project an unnatural phenomenon into reality. On the other hand, by experiencing the phenomenon through the virtual terminal device, there's no need to expend energy to rewrite reality, nor is there a risk for spell failure. Herein also lies the risk for virtual terminal devices."

Tatsuya temporarily stopped at this point.

Because he felt that he was being overly loquacious.

However, his friends that were arrayed in front of him wore equal parts understanding and incomprehension on their faces, so he felt that his explanation wasn't detailed enough and plodded on.

"Virtual terminal devices would cause a Magician to hallucinate and believe that they can effortlessly alter reality with no consequence. People incapable of using magic wouldn't run into this problem in the first place. Skilled Magicians would be able to differentiate what they are capable of, but immature Magicians may confuse the difference between what they experienced in the virtual world with what they can actually accomplish and overestimate their abilities.

Once immature Magicians have become accustomed to altering reality without the concepts of hard work or failure, they become unable to reflect upon why they cannot use magic to successfully rewrite reality and lose the ability to think critically and the drive to do so. Hence the popular belief that immature Magicians still studying magic experience harm from using virtual terminal devices."

Tatsuya paused again to survey his friends' faces.

Additional explanations were probably unnecessary, but he'd still conclude as a precaution.

"In other words, the problem lies in whether the user believes he or she has accomplished something they were previously unable to. Utilizing virtual terminal devices to test the waters isn't a problem in and of itself. That type of virtual experience actually benefits the planning phases for constructing Magic Sequences. At the end of the day, it remains extremely challenging to pick out only the benefits, so I feel that a global ban on virtual terminal devices made perfect sense."

"Is that so..... I actually learned a lot from that."

Tatsuya felt that Honoka's nodding was overly zealous and also believed he said too much.

Even if she heavily relied on him, he had no way of responding.....

Those were Tatsuya's heartfelt words.

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The test for the prototype calculation device was set after dinner, using one of the outdoor combat training facilities on the outskirts of the Nine Schools Competition area.

Tatsuya didn't make the arrangements; Erika was the one who called on her connections.

Since arriving here, Erika seemed to be frivolously throwing around her family's influence in a self-destructive manner.

Did something happen that caused her mental landscape to change?

Speaking of which, Tatsuya recalled that something similar happened during the banquet.

Nevertheless, Tatsuya was powerless to act regardless of how worried he was.

His own emotions were only façades anyways.

It was probably better to look the other way and let an engineer's curiosity take first priority. This was probably a more honest method to go about it.

Tatsuya convinced himself this way and once again warned himself against butting into other people's business.

"Leo, do you understand the mechanics?"

Next, he had to focus all his concentration on this test.

Even if this was something done during his leisurely time — even if this was an overly simplified way of applying modern magic — this still broke new ground for testing magic and calculation devices.

If an accident occurred due to his complacency, the one who would bear the brunt of it would be Leo and not Tatsuya.

"Uh, I think so..... But, am I really going to do that?"

"That" likely referred to the demonstrated motions he saw within the HMD.

Likely was the wrong word to use, since that was the only possibility at this point.

"We're undergoing this test to find out."

"You're right."

This training facility was 30 minutes away from the hotel by foot.

This would pose no problems during the day, but it was night time now.

Likewise, city districts would be fine, but they were located in a military training facility in the mountains.

Miyuki and Erika stubbornly refused to cooperate, but were finally persuaded to remain at the hotel.

Despite this, Tatsuya still remained uneasy, so he called on Honoka to watch Miyuki and Mizuki to keep an eye on Erika.

Now, only Tatsuya and Leo were present.

"Let's begin."

"Got it."

Initially, they weren't going to use the slashing (more like striking) dummy.

Right now, they needed to verify the movements of the Weaponized Integrated CAD without performing any physical actions.

"Starting now."

Leo thumbed the activation button on the bottom of the hilt.

With a "clang" sound, a feathery touch crossed his fingers.

He wrapped his index finger around the trigger near the top of the handguard and started supplying psions.

Contrary to his physical impression, Leo's supply of psions wasn't explosive, but possessed an inexhaustible durability. Correction, maybe that would be the most suitable description for his youthful and energetic side.

If a CAD was not calibrated for individual use, there would be practically no assistance in constructing Magic Sequences, so there was a small delay as the Activation Sequence was translated into the Magic Sequence.

Approximately 0.6 seconds.

Even so, this was still much swifter than during practical skills class.

This might be caused by his personal expertise in this field of magic, or the outstanding performance from the CAD and Activation Sequence.

Regardless of which one it was or both at the same time, this detail remained unimportant. What was important right now was to observe the activated magic in action and not the time necessary to activate aforementioned magic.

"Oh?"

Leo gasped, not because the magic was activating, but because the effects of inertia far exceeded his expectations.

"Haha, it's actually floating, how incredible!"

Leo revealed a childlike smile and swung the "sword" that had less than one half of the blade still attached.

The other half of the blade floating in midair mimicked his motion and swung in a similar arc.

"Three, two, one....."

"Whoa......."

Leo stopped upon hearing Tatsuya counting down.

"Zero."

With the end of the countdown, the blade swiftly reconnected with the "broken" blade and reformed into a complete "sword".

"Tatsuya, that was a complete success."

Leo was wearing a thoroughly delighted expression as he raised a thumb, whereas Tatsuya mirrored his gesture.

"Still, I'm impressed that you could come up with something like this. Detaching the blade from the hilt, then using Fortifying Magic to solidify its position and 'shoot' out the blade. I still can't believe I just did that. Now I know Fortifying Magic can also operate by separating objects."

"That is because the core concept behind Fortifying Magic is stabilizing relative positions, and if you ignore all the stereotypes, you find that objects don't have to be physically connected to one another. In addition, the operational form of this CAD is more like 'extension' rather than being 'shot out'.

The blade will only elongate in a linear fashion, since the middle segment is empty space."

"I never thought about that, I'll just treat this like a really~ long sword."

Just as Leo said, this weaponized calculation device wasn't like other long range system weapons that required additional energy to control, but was simply matching the motion of the blade while flying at a set distance until the magic lost effect.

"Speaking of which, why did the blade come back? I didn't activate any other magic."

"Oh, that's simple. That's an electric current reaction-type recall alloy, so it only separates the moment an electric current is applied to break the connection."

Leo nodded to signify his understanding, since this was a popular design in the modern era.

"So if a large force is applied during the state where magic isn't supplied, this could easily be broken."

"That's not a problem, we just have to store it in a scabbard when not in use, right?"

"That's true, shall we perform live tests on dummies? Or test the fluctuations during separation?"

"Tatsuya, while this thing is separated, is the length adjustable?"

"That's not impossible, but exceedingly difficult. Currently, the Activation Sequence tied to the activation button on the hilt is set as a constant, but that can be easily changed to a variable. The challenge lies in that whenever the length needs to be adjusted, a new magic needs to overwrite the previous one."

"Is that the case?"

"If the return speed could be increased, then there's no need to concern ourselves with the changing distances in between. After all, a real sword can't elongate itself halfway through the slashing motion."

"Yet Erika seems to be able to accomplish that feat. What do you plan to do?"

"Well..... Let's do a dummy test first."

"Got it."

Tatsuya manipulated a control mechanism that was slightly larger than a notepad and called up three man-sized straw dolls from the ground.

".....Oldschool."

".....I wonder whose hobby this is?'

Even though regenerating products had become mainstream in modern society, the oddly outdated design still prompted the two of them to exchange a helpless glance.

"Regardless..... In terms of sheer specs, they'll do as slashing targets."

"Straw dolls don't have any "specs"..... But there's no other choice."

Leo slapped his face lightly with his empty left hand to focus himself, then fell into a stance against the straw dolls.

He thumbed the power switch.

The blade flew into the sky.

Leo swung the weapon with all his strength.

Ahead of his right arm, the detached blade built up rotational momentum to a respectable speed before smashing into the straw doll.

"Lot of strain on the arm."

Leo looked like his hand had gone numb, but he lightly swung the restored medium length, sword-like weaponized calculation device as he voiced his thoughts.

"That's because while the flying part is physically small and despite the fact that speed can supplement strength somewhat, inertia still remains an issue, so you need extra arm strength to compensate."

"No wonder. So in actual combat, I would need to apply more strength into each of my swings."

Leo acknowledged Tatsuya's explanations with a nod of his head and aimed at the next target.

As he watched Leo fall into another combat stance, Tatsuya thought:

(Indeed, even after applying an actual blade, a slight increase in weight would be perfect for combat conditions. Still, this level of power would be appropriate for competition venues.)

The thought circulating in Tatsuya's mind was the restriction on direct contact during "Monolith Code". This weaponized calculation device had a flying blade, so it bypassed this restriction.

(.....Not that there's any connection here.)

While he claimed this was strictly a toy, he was still actively considering practical applications. Tatsuya could only secretly laugh at himself.

Chapter 7

It's the third day of the Nine Schools Competition.

The Men and Women's "Icicle Destruction" and "Battle Board" were being held today, making this the biggest hurdle of the first half of the Nine Schools Competition.

The players from First High that had advanced thus far included two men in "Icicle Destruction", two men and women in "Battle Board", and one woman in "Icicle Destruction".

This was not going according to plan, but was still within the acceptable combat parameters.

"Hattori-senpai is on first for the Men's Team, Watanabe-senpai is in the second round for the Women's Team, Chiyoda-senpai is set for the first round, and Group Leader Juumonji is scheduled for the third round....."

Tatsuya felt a headache forming as he surveyed the schedule.

Even if the start of the contest didn't coincide perfectly with the schedule, he could only watch either Hattori's or Kanon's event.

(Though Hattori-senpai probably doesn't want me to watch him compete.....)

That being said, Miyuki and Hattori were both part of the Student Council, so not watching Hattori's contest was still a problem.

"Ah, found you, Tatsuya-kun!"

Still, Tatsuya no longer had to concern himself with this, or maybe he no longer had to concern himself period.

"President, what's the matter?"

"I was hoping you could help."

Mayumi dragged Tatsuya towards the engineering vehicles.

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"Onii-sama, it's about to start!"

In the end, Tatsuya barely got away in time to catch the start of Mari's event.

Mari had dropped by when Tatsuya was working and specifically reminded him: "You are going to come watch me, right?" If he stayed away after that, even if he was just a little tardy and missed the opening segment, he would never hear the end of it.

Tatsuya thanked his little sister and friends for saving him a spot, then turned to look at the starting line.

Looks like he made it just in time.

Mari was wearing her customary headband with her hair fluttering as she adopted the set position.

There were a total of three contestants in the semifinal round, which would run for two matches.

The winners of the two matches would advance to the final round where they would duel one another.

The two others were tense with anxiety, but Mari fearlessly awaited the starting signal.

The "Get Set" whistle sounded.

The audience was dead silent.

After a split second, the second whistle rang out.

The race was on.

The first one out the gate was Mari.

Unlike the preliminary round, the one in second was right on her heels.

The player in third was only slightly further behind.

"They're tough.....!"

"No wonder they're known as 'Seventh High of the Waves'."

"I remember that they had the same team in last year's finals."

The billowing waves on the surface were clear evidence that their magic was interfering with one another.

Generally, Mari would use her position in the lead to take advantage of the waves to disrupt her opponent behind her, hereby achieving greater effect than the sum of its parts, but the player from Seventh High adeptly maneuvered her board to compensate for her disadvantage in magic.

The three players threaded through the snaking aqueduct and rounded the tight corner neck to neck.

After passing through there, they entered a passage that couldn't be seen from the observation deck, so now the action had to be watched through the television screens.

Tatsuya glanced towards the widescreen TV that was displaying the images from the sharp turn.

"Huh?"

A small oddity onscreen grabbed his attention.

"Ah!"

So Tatsuya accidentally missed this moment.

Screams erupted from the stands.

Tatsuya frantically looked back.

The player from Seventh High had completely lost her balance.

"Speed Burst?"

Someone shouted out.

That's certainly what it looked like.

The player's board wasn't gripping the water's surface.

As if in full flight, the player from Seventh High was gliding across the water's surface and was about to slam straight into the railing.

—Under the assumption that no one was in the way.

Mari, who had just finished decelerating and was ready to sprint ahead, was directly in the path of the trajectory.

Mari faced the railing.

Even so, she still kept her head turned behind her, likely because she detected the oncoming presence from the rear.

Her following action, could only be described as superlative.

Mari canceled her forward acceleration and switched to parallel rotational acceleration, using the waves crashing back from the walls of the aqueduct and her own magic to spin the board halfway around.

Next, she used multiple recalculations to use two new magics and prepared to receive the out of control Seventh High player.

First she used Move-Type Magic to fling away the player's board and then applied Weight-Type Inertial Neutralization Magic to prevent herself from crashing into the railing after catching the other player.

This would have been enough to avert disaster.

If the water's surface didn't suddenly dip.

It was only a minute difference.

However, Mari was in the middle of a high level technique to achieve a 180 degree turnaround.

Mari wasn't a surfing expert, she was just using superb magic and personal buffing to change her stance. The moment her flotation faded, her balance was destroyed as well.

Which in turn caused the activating magic to fizzle.

She successfully redirected the other player's board that was hurtling towards her legs.

But the Inertial Neutralization Magic didn't activate, which sent the player from Seventh High careening into Mari.

The two of them slammed into the railing together.

Shrill shrieks sounded from all around the stands.

Immediately, a flag rose to signal a halt to the competition.

Tatsuya couldn't help but rise to his feet.

Mari was sandwiched between the railing and the player from Seventh High.

It looked like she wasn't able to successfully erect any protective measures.

"Onii-sama!"

Completely pale, Miyuki was gazing up at him.

"I'll go take a look, you guys stay here."

Tatsuya had received military and guardian training since youth, which more than qualified him for minor surgical operations.

"Understood."

Tatsuya's steady voice allowed Miyuki to realize that everyone going to take a look would only add to the panic, so she waved her hands to signal their friends to take a seat and nodded her assent towards Tatsuya.

Tatsuya charged down the observation deck and threaded through the dense crowds as if performing a magic trick.

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She did not wake very quickly.

There seemed to be a thick cloud hanging over her consciousness, so it was difficult to grasp her surroundings.

What was she doing here.....?

This was the first question that flashed across Mari's mind as she awoke.

"Mari, are you awake? Do you know who I am?"

An evil friend — even at this time in the privacy of her mind, Mari still didn't apply the term "friend" — could be seen in front of her face.

Mari knew the literal meaning of the question, but was unable to comprehend why the question was asked, so she murmured in confusion—

"Mayumi, what are you talking about? Why would you ask....."

—Halfway through her sentence, Mari recalled the reason why Mayumi asked the question as well as her current predicament.

"So I'm in the hospital....."

"Yes, the hospital at Susono Base. Thank goodness..... Looks like there was no mental damage."

"How long was I out?"

There was still a dull throbbing coming from the back of her head, which allowed Mari to realize that she didn't fall asleep, but was forcefully knocked unconscious after failing to erect defenses in time.

"Since just after noon. Ah, don't get up yet."

Mari wanted to sit herself up, but Mayumi quickly pushed her back down.

She didn't apply a lot of strength, but Mari's physical mobility was reduced to less than half.

"Your ribs are broken and while they've used magic to reconnect them, they still need some time to stabilize. I think you know very well that healing magic is ultimately only an emergency measure."

"There's only the outward appearance of recovery during the stabilization period, rather than instantaneous recovery — don't worry, I know at least that much."

Mari took the words right out of Mayumi's mouth as she murmured to herself and sank back down onto the bed.

"How long will I be out?"

"At least a week for a full recovery, though you are cleared for daily activities after one day of bed rest. Still, to be on the safe side, you are forbidden from strenuous activity for the next ten days."

"Hey, then.....!"

"You'll have to withdraw from "Mirage Bat" too. There's nothing we can do about that."

"Is that so....."

Mari sighed and closed her eyes.

She reopened them after a short interval.

"What was the conclusion of the contest?"

"The instigator from Seventh High was banned as punishment with Third and Ninth High advancing to the finals. Kobayakawa-san was highly motivated, so I think we have a chance to seize Third Place."

"Kobayakawa is more than capable so long as she doesn't mentally handicap herself."

"Indeed. By the way, the player from Seventh High didn't suffer major injuries, so your efforts weren't wasted."

".....It doesn't really count as helping if I'm seriously injured myself."

Mari scowled as she was complaining, though her "pretense" at negativity drew a light laugh from Mayumi.

Mayumi averted her head and feigned ignorance.

"On the Men's Team, Hattori-kun advanced to the finals, but Murakami-kun just barely missed out. Juumonji-kun and Kanon-san both advanced to the single elimination portion of 'Icicle Destruction' on their respective sides."

"So I'm the only one who couldn't fulfill her end of the bargain....."

"It's not your fault. Mari, you made the right decision. If you didn't halt your acceleration, you might have been able to narrowly avoid the collision and advance to the finals, but..... The player from Seventh High would likely have suffered serious injury to the point that her life as a Magician might be over, that's how dangerous her situation was. Tatsuya-kun also concurs."

".....Hey, why are you bringing up this guy's name now?"

"Because he was the one who escorted you here and stayed on station while you were undergoing treatment."

"What?"

"Well, of course we didn't leave it all to Tatsuya-kun himself..... Shocked?"

Mayumi sported a grin while Mari turned around with a miserable expression on her face.

It was precisely because she felt a tight knot unraveling inside her that Mayumi's grin irked her even more.

"Naturally, men wouldn't be present while ladies are changing, so he obediently waited in the corridor while treatment was ongoing. But you better thank him later on. He arrived practically at the same time as the emergency response teams and helped bring you to shore. He also spotted your fractures in one glance and gave the orders for treatment."

".....Who the devil is this guy?"

Mari's eyes were wide with amazement while Mayumi nodded deeply.

"How should I put this, he seems very adept at dealing with accidents and victims..... Speaking of which, what's your status?"

"Why are you asking this now..... I have a small headache, but that's a strictly physical injury, and my head is clear."

"Looks like there's no trauma..... In that case, let me get this over with now."

"?"

Mayumi pinned the still befuddled Mari with a serious look.

"What's with the sudden serious attitude?"

"Mari..... At that time, were you hindered by an outsider's magic?"

"What do you mean?"

"Just as Mari was about to catch the player from Seventh High, did you lose your balance because a third party maliciously used magic to disrupt the water's surface? This is what I want to express."

Upon comprehending the intent behind Mayumi's words, Mari's eyes glinted with alertness.

"......Just before the board started sinking, I did feel an odd vibration near my feet, but I have no idea if that was caused by magic and even less of an idea if it was malicious..... Why would you think that?"

"When you lost your balance, the water movements were very unnatural, to the point that there is suspicion that this was caused through illogical means like phenomenon rewriting magic. Yet, neither player from the other schools used this magic, so the only remaining possibility is that an outside third party cast this magic. Tatsuya-kun also concurs. I heard that he's requesting the recording from the committee in order to analyze the fluctuations on the water's surface. At least we can find out if this was actually caused by unnatural, foreign forces."

"I would like to call into question why a high school freshman is capable of such an analysis, but let's table that for now..... Since the other players and I were all using magic, why are we investigating if there were unnatural, foreign forces at work? I for one think this is pointless....."

"Tatsuya-kun said that the players' magic effects could be taken into account as well to determine if outside forces were acting on the situation. Isori-kun also said that he would go help him after the contests were over today, so I think between the two of them, we can find some meaningful answers. Mari, if you can think of anything else, please let me know. This doesn't just concern us — the overall standings for First High, this may impact the entire Nine Schools Competition and all the magic high schools combined."

"....."

As Mari silently digested this from the bed, Mayumi said "I should go" and departed from the room.

Now alone, Mari directed a solemn gaze towards the ceiling.

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Upon hearing the knocking sounds, Miyuki went to open the door and found a pair of 2nd Year students waiting outside.

"Please come in..... Onii-sama, Isori-senpai, and Chiyoda-senpai are here."

Miyuki's words prompted Tatsuya to stop typing and rise from his chair.

"Sorry for calling you here."

"No problem, please don't worry about that. After all, I was the one who volunteered and couldn't bring the still active terminal device over here."

Tatsuya nodded slightly in agreement whereas Isori casually waved a hand.

After thanking him again, Tatsuya turned towards Kanon.

"Chiyoda-senpai, congratulations on winning the gold."

"Thank you. Since Mari-senpai got caught up in that incident, the rest of us have to work harder on her behalf!"

Hot-blooded would be the perfect way to describe Kanon with her fists clenched, causing Tatsuya to reevaluate her as dazzling.

"So, did we find anything?"

"I've gone through the recording once and arrived at the conclusion that this is definitely the work of an outside party. Isori-senpai, would you mind verifying this one more time?"

"Got it..... As expected of Shiba-kun, that was fast."

Isori accepted the invitation and sat down while using a hand gesture to express his admiration.

There was a modest monitor (standard size, 20 inches) on the table that was split into two screens, one displaying the actual recording itself while the other was strictly the outline of what happened.

Isori picked up the visual pointer shaped like a monocle with a brain wave supplementary add-on and smoothly unfurled the thin, long C-type metal frame around his head, adjusted the monocle over his right eye, and placed his finger on the buttons near the bottom center of the keyboard.

The brain wave supplementary add-on and the visual pointers were originally intended for users to input data without the need to remove their hands from the keyboard, but have since progressed to the point that direct input on the keyboard has become unnecessary.

However, Isori chose to use the original function, which was a pure supplement to keyboard input.

The actual recording and the model images both started moving under Isori's direction.

He quickly fast forwarded to the moment the incident occurred, then proceeded to play the sequence in slow motion.

Above the model images, lines of data described the changes in the water's surface.

Within the scene in question, which was when the water's surface dipped downward, an unknown quantity arose, signifying that the "power" released could not be explained by magic interference from the three players.

Isori paused the image and turned around.

"......This is even more troublesome than we imagined."

"Kei, what happened?"

"Kanon, you know that in order to prevent outsiders illegally using magic to interfere with the competition, the Nine Schools Competition hired highly skilled counter magic Magicians and stationed them as committee members all over the various arenas, then placed cameras all over the place to observe the situation. Since the network didn't catch this, I suspected that the culprit acted from a high altitude that exceeds the security network and fired a compressed block of air downwards to cause the dip in the water's surface. But if that were the case, there's no way Watanabe-senpai could have missed it and I also realize this is an outrageous hypothesis.

Yet, based on Shiba-kun's analysis, the dip in the water's surface originated from within the water itself. If someone utilized a Magic Sequence from outside the aqueduct, the security network would immediately pick up on it. The only natural way for the water's surface to dip downwards would be a leak, so that possibility can also be ruled out. The only possibility remaining is that someone was hiding in the water for this precise moment..... But that's almost impossible....."

"Could Shiba-kun's analysis be incorrect?"

Kanon's blunt question caused Miyuki to stiffen.

"No."

However, before Miyuki could speak, Isori denied Kanon's assertion.

"Shiba-kun's analysis is flawless, at least it is not within my capability to discern any errors."

Isori and Kanon both lapsed into silence.

The silence lasted around two minutes before it was broken by more knocking.

Miyuki visually interrogated her brother and only moved to open the door after her brother nodded in agreement.

She quickly returned.

With two classmates in tow.

"Mizuki said that Onii-sama wanted them to come over....."

"Sorry for calling the two of you all the way over here."

Tatsuya verified his sister's question and turned to the two upperclassmen.

"Allow me to introduce you: These two are my classmates Yoshida and Shibata. I think you two know these two are Isori-senpai and Chiyoda-senpai from 2nd Year."

Mikihiko and Mizuki were both a little tense and, after a quick round of self introductions from Isori and Kanon, Tatsuya used a concise answer to respond to the five questioning looks sent his way.

"I asked the two of them to come and identify our culprit."

This sentence alone was a little too vague for anyone to understand.

Tatsuya knew from the get go, so he kept explaining without pausing.

"We are now examining the possibility that Watanabe-senpai's incident was caused by malicious interference from an outside party."

This was for Mikihiko and Mizuki's benefit.

Mikihiko knit his brows while Mizuki revealed an astounded expression.

"As Watanabe-senpai was losing her balance, an unnatural dip appeared on the water's surface, which disrupted the timing for her Inertial Neutralization Magic and forced her to collide with the railing. The change on the water's surface was almost certainly caused by magic cast from within the water."

Mizuki still hadn't shaken off her astonishment.

Yet, upon hearing Tatsuya's words, Mikihiko's eyes took on a hard look.

"It is strictly impossible to cast magic on the water from outside the stadium without detection. The possibility that this is caused by delayed magic is also low. Because if that was the case, Kobayakawa-senpai would have detected this in the first race."

Modern magic also had magic that activated after a set delay, but the Magic Sequence must be "recorded" onto the object. Once the delayed magic was cast, the target object would be under the influence of magic rewriting and interfere with the next magic cast on the target object.

"If that is the case, then the only possibility remaining is that something hidden in the water cast the magic — this is the conclusion Isori-senpai and I arrived at."

Tatsuya visually sought confirmation from Mikihiko and Mizuki, who both nodded in understanding.

"Still, having a living, breathing Magician submerge themselves in water sounds ridiculous. Currently, neither modern magic nor Ancient Magic is able to accomplish this feat flawlessly."

This time, Tatsuya's words prompted Isori and Kanon to nod in agreement.

"If that's the case, a more suitable hypothesis is that 'something inhuman' cast magic while hiding in the waterway."

Isori and Kanon glanced at one another, mirroring each other's confusion.

After a while, Isori finally asked.

"......Shiba-kun thinks this may be the work of Spirit Magic?"

Tatsuya nodded in response to Isori's words.

Magicians that use modern magic typically use psion surges to identify magic.

But SB, or Spiritual Beings, are primarily composed of pushions. Pushions are supplements used to "move" the objects around — precisely like ordering spirits around — this was the current dominant theory.

It wasn't that Magicians couldn't identify pushions.

Yet, in ordinary circumstances, they couldn't identify them as readily as psions.

For example, even though the human senses could detect infrared rays as "warmth", there was no way to distinguish between colors the same way they could for visible light.

Magicians could use their senses to identify active pushions.

But had a very difficult time identifying inactive ones.

In other words, Magicians using modern magic couldn't detect dormant Spiritual Beings.

If they were using a Spiritual Being planted ahead of time — a type of delayed magic using Spiritual Beings, there was a high probability that they would elude the committee's detection.

"Yoshida is an expert on Spirit Magic and Shibata is especially sensitive towards pushion light."

"Hence why you called the two of them."

Tatsuya once again nodded towards Isori and turned to face Mikihiko.

"Mikihiko, I would like your expert opinion. Is there a way for Spiritual Magic to delay activating for several hours and then selectively create a dip in the water's surface?"

"Yes."

Mikihiko immediately replied.

"Based on those conditions, all you would have to do is set the start of the second race as the primary condition, then someone's approach as the

second condition and order the water spirit to create a wave or whirlpool. Even if spirits are off the table, a shikigami can accomplish that too."

"Can you do it?"

"With enough time to prepare. I cannot do that right this moment, but give me half a month to prepare and repeatedly enter the arena to make the arrangements, I should be able to."

"Would you need to infiltrate the arena the day before?"

"No need. As long as I'm familiar with the lay of the land, I can use the ley lines to send the spirits, which is the point of investigating beforehand. However....."

"?"

"Even if they managed to accomplish this, there's almost no power to speak of. Spirits are empowered by the user's emotions and will, so if it was set several hours beforehand, I feel that the only thing lingering would be something like a practical joke at best."

"In other words?"

"Even if they could disrupt the water's surface, they couldn't use this method to create large enough waves to disrupt Watanabe-senpai's balance. If the player from Seventh High didn't happen to lose control at the exact same time, this would be relegated to kid's play."

For some reason, Tatsuya gave a massive nod at Mikihiko's words.

"That's only under the assumption that it was an accident in the first place....."

"Ah?"

Mikihiko was unable to follow Tatsuya's cryptic words, but Tatsuya didn't immediately reply and instead turned his gaze on Mizuki.

"Mizuki, during Watanabe-senpai's incident, did you see the movements of the SB?"

".....I was wearing my glasses at the time .....Sorry."

"Please don't say that. You're right, that's my mistake. Mizuki, you don't have to apologize."

Tatsuya bowed his head towards the glum Mizuki and Miyuki also came over to comfort her.

"In regards to what we were just talking about....."

Tatsuya turned back to Mikihiko.

Yet Isori and Kanon both knew these words were also directed towards them.

"I feel that the loss of control from the player from Seventh High was not a pure coincidence. Take a look at this."

Tatsuya brought Mikihiko in front of the monitor and restarted the model images.

He was also paying attention to Isori and Kanon, who were peeking around to take a look, and stopped the recording shortly before the accident occurred.

"The player from Seventh High would normally decelerate at this point."

Then proceeded to advance the recording frame by frame.

"But as everyone can see, she was actually continuing to build up speed."

".....You're right, that is extremely odd."

"Indeed. A Magician who would make such a fundamental mistake has no business being in the Nine Schools Competition."

Tatsuya nodded in agreement with Isori and Kanon's opinions, then returned the playback to normal speed.

"I suspect that the CAD the player from Seventh High was using had been tampered with."

The room was suffused with shock.

"This is the first major turn that requires deceleration along the entire route. If the decelerating Activation Sequence was swapped for an accelerating Activation Sequence, an accident here is unavoidable. Based on last year's results, it is well within predictable boundaries that Watanabe-senpai

and the player from Seventh High would be neck to neck at this stage. If my goal was to sabotage them, this would be the perfect opportunity to eliminate two favored candidates for First Place in one fell swoop."

"That sounds reasonable..... But could they tamper with the CAD? And if so, when would they do that?"

"Unless there's a traitor that snuck into Seventh High's technician team?"

Tatsuya slightly shook his head at Isori and Kanon's questions.

"Alas, we have no proof. Even if we petitioned Seventh High to review their CADs, they are guaranteed to rebuff us. Still, I think there's an opportunity to do so."

"So there really is a traitor?"

Tatsuya once more shook his head at Kanon's speculation, but this time he was noticeably slower.

"While there's no way to properly gauge this possibility..... I think there's a much higher chance that there is a mole in the committee."

His words stopped there.

Isori, Kanon, and Mikihiko were all struck speechless.

They all wore skeptical expressions.

"......But Onii-sama, assuming there is a mole on the committee, how and when would they tamper with the CADs? Each school jealously guards their own competition-use CADs....."

Miyuki would never question Tatsuya's judgment. She was only assuming her brother's hypothesis was true and asking for the next step in the puzzle.

Tatsuya did not reply directly, but told everyone a publicly known piece of information.

"All CADs are guaranteed to leave each school's control and be turned over to the committee once."

"Ah.....!"

Miyuki let out a gasp since she had never thought of this. On top of that, she was the only one who gasped, since Isori, Kanon, Mikihiko, and Mizuki were all struck dumb.

"Still, there's no way of telling what their methods are, that is the truly puzzling area....."

Just in case, they could not let down their guard even for an instant.

Miyuki and Tatsuya, the former who was about to begin her competition and the latter who was responsible for calibrating CADs, carved those words into their hearts.

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For the third day, First High took First Place in both "Icicle Destruction" contests, Second Place in Men's "Battle Board", and Third Place in Women's "Battle Board".

Third High took Second Place in both "Icicle Destruction" contests as well as First Place in both "Battle Board" contests, so the two schools were much closer than the day before.

Before the competition began, Mari had told Tatsuya that the Newcomers Division shouldn't have an impact on the final result. In this case, she appeared to be mistaken.

Tatsuya meticulously examined the CADs for the players he was responsible for and prepared for tomorrow's Newcomers Division. It was this moment Mayumi sent a message via terminal requesting his presence.

Bewildered, he paused his work and thought "What does she need me for at this hour?". As he headed for the conference room reserved for First High, he ran into Miyuki at the door.

"Did the President call for you too, Miyuki?"

"Yes, Onii-sama as well?"

Tatsuya initially considered that Isori and company would ask him to come and discuss countermeasures against future sabotage, but that wouldn't explain why Miyuki had also been summoned.

"Let's go inside."

"Yes."

There were some things that could only be discerned after careful thought, and some that couldn't be discerned no matter how much one thought about it.

If pondering posed no benefit, then taking action was the way to go.

As the ancients say, pointless pondering is time wasting.

"Excuse us."

Tatsuya didn't want to be mired in such tiresome thoughts — likewise, he didn't do so by any great principle, but at least he didn't needlessly worry himself before opening the door.

Mayumi, Suzune, and Katsuto were inside — as well as Mari, who should be in bed.

"Thanks for your hard work. Are you ready for tomorrow?"

"No, I still need some time."

"Is that so..... I'm sorry, I called Tatsuya-kun as well."

According to Mayumi's guilty words, the primary recipient of these words was Miyuki.

"Please, take a seat."

The siblings did so side by side.

"There's a small detail I would like to discuss with you two..... Sorry, it's no small thing.

I asked the two of you to come to discuss something of vital importance."

It seemed like it had been ages since Mayumi's tone was so serious, causing Tatsuya to perk up a little.

"Rin-chan, can you explain?"

So she still uses "Rin-chan" even when in a serious mood, Tatsuya thought as he looked towards Suzune.

"I think you two are aware of the current standings."

This was obviously a rhetorical question on Suzune's part, but Tatsuya and Miyuki both nodded anyway.

"Although we ran into some unforeseen accidents, our school's running score is roughly the same as our predictions. Unfortunately, Third High's score is vastly greater than we anticipated, so the difference between us is a lot less than we had hoped."

At this point, both of the siblings nodded to show that they understood.

"That being said, we still possess enough of a lead. Even if we aren't the overall winner for the Newcomers Division, we can still claim the overall victory so long as we claim First Place for the last 'Monolith Code' and the score differential isn't too large. However, if we fall too far behind Third High, then it may come down to the 'Mirage Bat' event from the Official Division."

Everything that Suzune detailed were all assumptions, so was she telling them to perform well during the Newcomers Division?

If that's all it was, there should be no need to call them at this hour..... Tatsuya was quite confused beneath his poker face.

"The point total from the Official Division is worth twice as much as the Newcomers Division, so our school's tactical advisors have arrived at the conclusion that we should make some sacrifices in the Newcomers Division and channel our firepower into the Official Division's 'Mirage Bat'."

Tatsuya's brow twitched. He quickly read between the lines of "some sacrifices in the Newcomers Division", thus producing minute changes in his poker face.

"Yes, Tatsuya-kun, it is exactly as you surmised."

Mayumi adroitly read the fractional changes on Tatsuya's face and preemptively responded.

"Miyuki-san, we ask you to replace Mari in 'Mirage Bat' for the Official Division. Tatsuya-kun will continue to serve as Miyuki-san's technician and compete on the ninth day."

Mayumi's words clashed with her earlier words, this was no discussion.

This was a declaration of what will be done.

"But there are other senpais that are only participating in one event, so why was I chosen as a replacement knowing that this would imperil the Newcomers Division?"

Miyuki's voice was steady, not overjoyed that she was suddenly promoted but staying cool and calm as she raised her next question.

Her reaction prompted an "Oh?" expression from Mari, even Katsuto was caught slightly off guard.

"We believe this way we can maximize our gains."

Suzune's voice was even calmer as she replied.

"The biggest reason is that we did not prepare a backup for 'Mirage Bat'."

Mari, who was originally the attending player, also joined the ranks of the persuaders.

"Even for our school's representative players, asking them to suddenly compete in the air during the Official Division's 'Mirage Bat' is still a stretch. Compared to this, we have a better chance sending a 1st Year student that has already trained for this. On top of that—"

Mari paused here for emphasis.

She was a young lady that loved to indulge in histrionics.

"Tatsuya-kun, your sister will triumph even in the Official Division, correct?"

And struck the weak spot for massive damage.

Tatsuya felt that this argument was being a little crafty, but he had no reason to be humble.

"Of course."

"Onii-sama....."

Tatsuya's certain answer was given as if he was stating a fact, causing Mari to break into a grin, Katsuto to nod kindly, Mayumi to widen her eyes, Suzune to shift her brows slightly, and Miyuki to duck her head in embarrassment.

"Since everyone has esteemed us so highly, I will put forth my all as an engineer. Miyuki, are you willing?"

"Y.....Yes!"

Miyuki's beautiful back was straighter than ever as she replied to Tatsuya in an elevated voice.

This perfectly conveyed her willingness to charge into the breach.

Afterword

Firstly, allow me to deeply thank all those who actually choose to pick this book up to read.

It has been 3 months since we last met, however I am sure that there are also those [who are meeting me for the first time today], however [these kinds] of words are overly used, therefore please forgive me for using them as well.

Now that 《Mahouka Koukou no Rettousei》 volume 3 has been released into the market, and in terms of arcs its the <first> of the second arc, I must apologise for ending it at such a delicate stage, though it's because I have tentatively set the beginning of volume 4 to be the moment when the first years (that's the protagonist group) really start to liven things up.

The next volume will be the second arc's <final>, rest assured that there won't be an <intermediate>, however, conversely the thickness of the volume will be rather spectacular.

Although Dengeki Bunko (ASCII Media Works) was willing to accept any level of thicknesses, however it would not be good to do this every time and that is why from the next next volume onwards I will conduct myself better—— however, I simply cannot make such a promise, as it may be too much for me to endure.

If you are someone who only reads the afterword after actually finishing the volume, you will know that this arc's main stage is the inter-school tournament.

Using invented magic to compete to decide a winner, to use magic skills to differentiate from each other.

Rather, other than just the representatives abilities, the technician team's skills also largely affects the chances of victory for the whole team.

For this, perhaps even more so than ball sports or track and field meets, it is more akin to the relationship found in racing, though unfortunately the wonderful atmosphere that is usually found in World Motorcycle Championship (MotoGP) or Formula One racing (F1) is not present here.

.....It's really kind of pitiful that only now do I think of such things, however I guess I can only be contented with adding racing elements into the next Nine Schools Competition then.

For example, using sponsors or ○○ girls and et cetera, maybe the editor will use this as the type of reference materials to focus their research on (There is no such thing)

I will stop the jokes here. Perhaps some of the readers may have already realised but the story line visualised this time is really similar to a certain popular world-class novel's fourth entry.[2]

However, the difference lies in the fact that that popular world-class novel's fourth entry is about an individual's competition, whereas my story is about a team competition. In addition to that, the forms of magic are completely different, therefore the competition's circumstances is in no way similar to each other.

Speaking of similarities, I cracked my brains over (how to properly create the settings of a fictional competition), and just like a certain popular world-class novel's..... fourth entry, maybe I should say that the whole thing is similar to Quidditch.

There are not many changes——wrong, I should say that it has already become a modern day type of a Quidditch competition.

Weirdly, the Author-sama of a certain (story) seems to not have cracked her mind about how to create such a scene, however I certainly had a headache over this. What I did manage to create is not nearly engaging and appealing enough, perhaps this is my limits as a writer.

Each of the competitions rules and regulations aren't that difficult (there shouldn't be any.....), I hope that all of you will use a light and relaxed mood to [appreciate] the vigorous actions of the students from the Magic High Schools.

In the next volume "Nine Schools Competition (II)", the main protagonist will finally distinguish himself in the competition. And not just in the arena, the protagonist will also have the opportunity to fully showcase his dark hero's abilities wantonly in the outside world.

This kind of (abnormal conduct) may lead to a bipolar disposition, however I hope that you will continue to accompany me onwards in my story.

Next, this time I would also like to extend my thanks to all those who were involved in the creation of this light novel.

M-sama, thank you giving me so many precise suggestions, especially [When on a trip, of course you need to go to an onsen]. Without this suggestion, the colored illustration as well as the normal novel illustration will not be able to depict such a wonderful scene.

Ishida-sama, Stone-sama, I am sorry that I made so many demands. The two of you patiently handled all my complicated and difficult requests, and designed such beautiful and wonderful illustrations for me, and for that I really don't know how I should thank you guys.

Especially the female protaganist's softening smile (M-sama's name) which caused me to sprout forbidden feelings for my own creation's character.

Furthermore, I would also like to thank the person in charge of the illustrations' color schemes, Suenaga-sama, as well as all the other helpers. It is all thanks to the assistance provided by everyone that an even better form of my light novel could be published.

And most importantly, I would like to express my deepest gratitude to the readers who have picked up this book. It is all thanks to your support that the following volumes should also be able to be successfully published.

With that, I hope that I will be able to meet you all again in the next volume, "Nine Schools Competition (II)".

(Satou Tsutomu)

References

1. ↑ "magic eyes" and "magical appearance" sound the same in Japanese.
2. ↑ Quite sure that this is referring to Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire

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